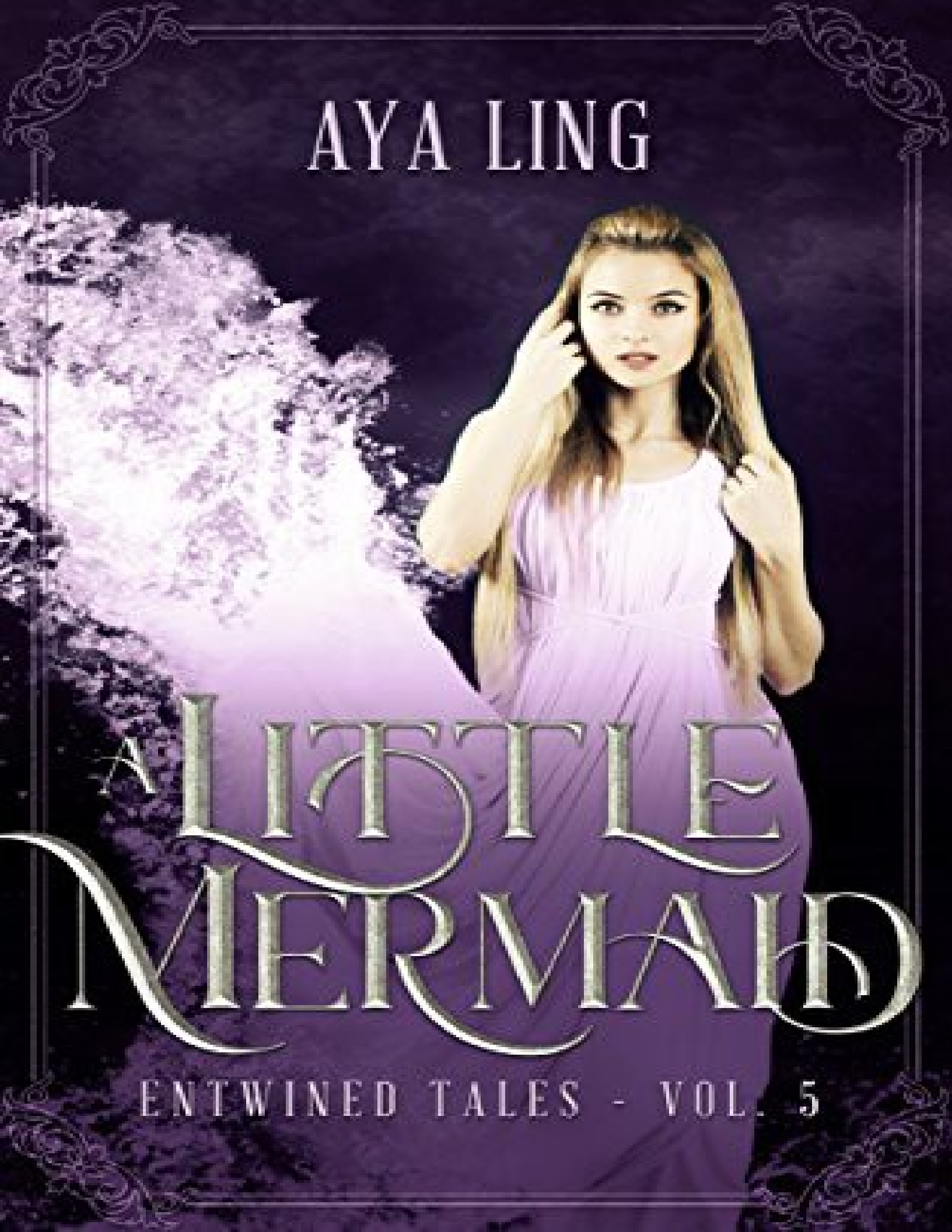
AYA LING



A LITTLE MERMAID

ENTWINED TALES - VOL. 5

A LITTLE MERMAID

AYA LING

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For the awesome ladies at the Indie Bunch. You are the best!

INTRODUCTION

All Clio wants is to make her crush—a fellow merman prince—notice her. She isn't interested in the people on land, much less a certain Prince Lukas, who was stupid enough to fall off a ship on his birthday. But when a bumbling fairy godfather misunderstands her, Clio finds herself in the worst situation imaginable—stranded on land with her tail and voice gone.

And her troubles are just beginning. Not only must Clio learn how to behave like a human, but she also needs to discover the identity of a mysterious assassin, all while guarding herself against flirtatious advances from Lukas, the very person she wants to avoid.

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I

What can you do when the merman you fancy doesn't even know you exist?

Clio sighed as she glided over the multicolored coral bed, watching a small fleet of brightly colored butterflyfish swim by, their bodies a brilliant yellow with black stripes. She envied how carefree they looked, darting through the water as if there was nothing on their minds but the joy of swimming in an area where no predators lurked.

She simply had the misfortune of being the youngest in a family of eight. How would Lucanus notice her when she had four older sisters, each one prettier than the last?

Zooey, her pet dolphin, did a little somersault in the water and blew air bubbles shaped like rings, showing that he wanted to play, but Clio simply flicked at the bubble ring listlessly, her mind still wrapped around her problem of getting Lucanus's attention.

He had arrived yesterday with his elder brother, Thanos, and his little sister, Thisbe. Her eldest sister, Iolanthe, was currently in a courtship with Thanos. Clio's heart gave a huge thump when she saw Lucanus—she was now eighteen, two years older than when she'd last seen him, and eligible to be courted.

But when she tried to attract his attention, Delia and Perrine immediately swarmed around Lucanus, flipping their hair and showing off their glittering fins.

Clio couldn't even make it through the wall they formed, let alone have a word with him. She was going to have her work cut out for her if she

could battle her way through her sisters and make Lucanus notice her. She had fancied him for such a long time even though she didn't get to see him often, given the distance between his kingdom and hers. Ever since the day he'd saved her life, she'd been hopelessly in love with him.

THE FIRST TIME SHE'D MET LUCANUS WAS WHEN SHE WAS SIXTEEN.

Clio had gone treasure hunting with her sister Nerissa, who was only a year older. The two of them were close since there was a five-year age gap between them and their elder sisters. While Clio and Nerissa had to wear their hair in childish braids and dress in plain, shapeless tops, their elder sisters got to style their hair fashionably with pearls and coral pins and show off their curvy figures in formfitting tops trimmed with lace and bows.

In the beginning, Clio hadn't wanted to treasure hunt or, rather, scavenge for stuff that humans dropped into the sea. Clio didn't see the appeal of land-made products, but Nerissa was hugely fascinated by the land dwellers. Once, she unearthed a pair of brass spectacles and kept swimming around with that bizarre object perched on her nose but later had to stop wearing it because it made her vision fuzzy.

"Do come with me," Nerissa begged. "Papa'll give me a good scolding if he knows I've gone off alone."

And with good reason, Clio thought. Nerissa was terrible at directions; she sometimes even got lost in their own massive home.

Clio, who was practicing a complicated mer-dance in front of the mirror, did three full pirouettes before coming to float gently in front of her sister.

"You already went hunting twice last week," she grumbled, "and you've plenty of baubles in your collection already. Can't you give it a rest?"

"Oh, but this time, it's going to be a big one!" Nerissa did a pirouette herself, stopping immediately before the effort made her dizzy. "I heard Kostas tell Delia tell Perrine that a scuffle had broken out on a ship carrying lots of things for trade, and a few chests had tumbled off. I want to find the cargo before Delia gets to it."

The unofficial rule for merpeople when finding objects dropped by humans into the sea was finders, keepers. After all, there was no way for them to trace the possessions back to the owners, and even if there were, no merman could travel on land.

“Think about it,” Nerissa went on. “There might be something unusual or valuable in those chests. You have to admit that *some* things the humans make are remarkable. Like the box Delia found.”

Clio remembered. Their second-eldest sister, Delia, had once unearthed a box filled with sparkling rubies, emeralds, and sapphires. For the first time in her life, Clio learned that gems could have so many colors. They didn’t have anything in the sea but pearls and aquamarines.

“But what if the chest is locked?”

Nerissa yanked something shiny from her hair—a silver hairpin. “I’ve learned how to pick locks. Kostas knows how, and I convinced him to teach me in exchange for the scimitar I found near Auntie’s old home.”

“You can open a chest with *that*?” In Clio’s mind, the only way to break a chest was to use a hammer.

“Of course. Come on, you’d never know what we might find. If there’s any sheet music or instruments, you could get the musicians to play new songs on your birthday.”

At the mention of music, Clio relented. She loved nothing better than dancing to music, and humans had invented some extraordinary instruments like violins and organs, which were great complements to their harps, drums, and flutes.

And so the two sisters set off, Nerissa weaving in and out of rocky ledges and clusters of seagrass while Clio, who was more interested in practicing a new choreography, spun and twirled and dived most of the time while half-heartedly looking for the edge of a wooden crate poking out from the sand.

She didn’t know how much time passed, but when she finally thought she had perfected every step in the dance, Clio closed her eyes and let herself float gently in the water, pleased with herself. Her sisters outdid her in almost every aspect besides being drop-dead gorgeous. Iolanthe could sing beautifully, Delia was an expert playing the harp and flute, and Nerissa was like a floating encyclopedia on human culture. Dancing was the only accomplishment she was reasonably good at. Clio dreamed of the day she

could perform at a major event. That way, she'd feel less useless and more competent. She wanted to live up to her status as a princess of Thalassa.

Clio's eyes flew open. Something slimy yet strong had caught her round the waist. Somehow, while she was floating with her eyes closed, she got herself entangled in a frond of giant kelp.

Clio struggled, but the slithery tentacles tightened around her—not only did she fail to extract herself, but she also got her left arm tangled up.

Geez, I'm even dumber than a brainless starfish.

"Nerissa!" she shouted. "I'm stuck! Get me out of here!"

Her sister appeared, but she only took one look and shook her head.

"Kelp can only be broken; I'm scared I'll make it worse for you." Her face was pale. "Wait here, and don't move. I'll go for help."

Nerissa swam out of sight, promising she'd be back as soon as possible, while Clio fumed in silent frustration. How could she be so stupid? And if a box jellyfish or sea snake came along…

She *really* wanted to struggle, but as Nerissa had said, she could make things worse. Better be poisoned than strangled to death… No, she didn't want to die! She was never going to treasure hunt with Nerissa again, never mind she was dumb enough to close her eyes in the first place.

"Where is she?"

The rich, deep voice echoed through the water. A gorgeous merman appeared, Nerissa following by his side. He had thick hair the color of squid ink, eyes the color of a vibrant-blue regal tang, and powerful arms that looked capable of wrestling with a barracuda.

"Where are you caught?" he asked, holding up a small dagger.

Embarrassed, Clio pointed at her left arm and waist.

He swam forward and cut away at the seaweed on her arm with clean, deft strokes. A cook could not have wielded his knife better. Then he muttered, "Excuse me," and laid a large palm on her hip, where her skin met scale. Gently, carefully, he removed the weed entwined around her waist.

While he worked, Clio couldn't help blushing. Never had she been in such close proximity to a merman, not to mention such a gorgeous one. Just a moment ago, she felt like killing Nerissa. Now, she could hug her sister for handing her such a romantic opportunity.

Once she was freed, she willed herself the courage to look into his eyes.

"Thank you," she said shyly. "You saved my life."

“Don’t mention it,” he said coolly, sliding his dagger back into the sheath, which he wore on his hips. Very nice hips, she couldn’t help noticing. “Stay away from this part of the sea. It’s dangerous.”

And he swam away, taking Clio’s heart with him. She gazed at his retreating figure, her eyes full of admiration, until she realized she’d forgotten to ask his name.

IF CLIO HAD NEVER SEEN HIM AGAIN, SHE MIGHT HAVE STORED THE MEMORY in her mind, like a musical box beautifully decorated with seashells, which she kept in a locked drawer. However, fate had other plans.

Just a few weeks after she was rescued by Mr. Tall Dark and Handsome, her father announced they had visitors from another kingdom. Pelagos, a distant mer-kingdom that was all the way on the other side of the ocean, to the west of Astoria, had sent two royal representatives to attend an exhibition of rare and unusual sea creatures.

Her sisters (with the exception of Nerissa, who was more interested in objects than people) were all excited by the news, for the representatives consisted of none other than Prince Thanos and Prince Lucanus, the Pelagosian king’s two eldest sons.

Her brothers were grumpy, though, about the lack of females. The only princess of Pelagos was a child—too young to be allowed to travel with them, much less with any potential of being a life partner.

Clio hadn’t thought much about the princes—they were closer to her sisters’ ages than hers, but when they arrived and she welcomed them with her family, her jaw dropped.

“Isn’t that the man who rescued you from the kelp?” Nerissa said.

She nodded, unable to speak.

“That’s Lucanus,” Perrine whispered. “Doesn’t he look like a delectable piece of smoked salmon?”

As her sisters laughed at the atrocious metaphor, Clio felt giddy with excitement. She hadn’t expected she’d see him again—she had been chiding herself for ages that she had forgotten to ask his name when he rescued her.

It had to be fate.

The more she came to know him, the more she liked him. Prince Lucanus wasn't just a pretty face; he was polite, well-mannered, and intelligent. He lifted coral trapdoors for the elderly. He was able to name the most obscure fish and plants. He wasn't in line for the throne, but it didn't matter. Clio was a romantic at heart, and she prided herself that she cared only for Lucanus for himself.

The problem? The chances of him liking her back were slimmer than a needlefish.

ZOOEY NUDGED HIS SNOUT AGAINST HER BACK, CLEARLY IMPATIENT TO play. With a sigh, Clio picked up a pile of hoops fashioned from coral and kelp. Throwing the hoops half-heartedly in the water, she watched her pet dolphin dive and catch the hoops with his snout. One settled around his head like a necklace, but Clio barely cracked a grin.

This morning at breakfast, Lucanus had actually mistaken her for Nerissa. He had apologized, but the damage was already done. The only feature she shared in common with Nerissa was their pale, ash-blond hair. Clio tried to appear like she didn't care, but inside she was wounded.

She had to do something—change her painfully shy behavior around him, for example. Even when she found a chance to be alone with him, she'd blush furiously and spout bubbles from her mouth. Lucanus wasn't a great conversationalist either; he responded but rarely asked questions, leaving her to agonize over what to talk about. How could she capture his heart when they barely had a word to say to each other?

"Clio?" Nerissa swam toward her, looking excited. She had no idea of Clio's crush on Lucanus. She spent all her time collecting and researching human objects, which diverted her attention from other areas. "Want to surface with us tonight?"

"Surfacing" meant popping out of the sea, usually to see the sunrise or the sunset or observe human activity. In the beginning, it was intriguing, but soon the novelty wore off. It was always ships, ships, and more ships, with sailors who rubbed their eyes and gawked whenever they spotted the mermaids.

“No, thanks,” she said gloomily. “I know you find human beings fascinating, but I don’t.”

“But this time, it’s going to be different!” Nerissa clasped her hands together, her eyes shining. “There’s a birthday celebration for the human prince! And it’s held on a ship, so we won’t have to swim to shore.” She caught Clio’s arm. “I heard there’s going to be fireworks. I’ve never seen them before; Papa said they’re like great flowers lighting up the sky. Doesn’t that sound incredible?”

Flowers in the sky? She doubted anything could compete with the variety of colors and shapes of their coral reefs under the sea.

“Everyone is going to see the party,” Nerissa said, seeing that she still looked unconvinced. “Even if you stay here, you’re going to be all alone.”

“Who is everyone?”

Nerissa went through the list of all their siblings and cousins. “And of course, Thanos and Lucanus are coming as well.”

Clio had a vision of herself bobbing on the waters with Lucanus, both of them laughing and watching the giant flowers exploding in the sky. Maybe the human prince’s birthday party would make it easier for her to talk to him.

“All right,” she said, trying not to appear too eager. “I’ll go.”

2

Clio’s grand plan of surfacing with Lucanus was dashed to pieces when her sisters flanked him closely. Moreover, she had to keep an eye on Nerissa, who was so eager to see the human prince’s birthday party that she swam ahead, but thanks to her poor sense of direction, she often made wrong turns.

“How old is Thisbe now?” she heard Iolanthe ask Thanos. If everything went well, Iolanthe would likely get engaged to Thanos by the end of this visit, which was why Clio was desperate to prevent her other sisters from snagging Lucanus, the only eligible merman prince left. “It’s the first time she came with you.”

“Nine,” Thanos said. “Mother wasn’t too keen to let her come, but she practically harassed Father until he’d let her go.”

Iolanthe gave a tinkling laugh, hiding her wide mouth behind a lily-white hand. Clio hid a grin too; Iolanthe’s normal laugh was rather… unladylike. It was rare to see her sister acting demure and refined. “A pity that she couldn’t join us for the surfacing, however. She was talking about how attractive the human prince was, and how criminal it was of you to forbid her to come.”

Thanos rolled his eyes. “I wish I never took her building sand castles on the Caladonian beach on her birthday. One glance at that Prince Lukas, and she’s got her head in an air bubble. Wouldn’t stop talking about him since she returned. Mother threatened to clamp a starfish on her mouth if she didn’t stop going on about how gorgeous His Royal Highness Lukas was

and how she wanted to grow a pair of legs when she reached adulthood so she could meet him properly."

Iolanthe snorted but quickly coughed to cover up her unladylike reaction. "Such an imagination the child has! That seems a bit cruel to deny her the chance of surfacing with us tonight."

Clio remembered the previous night how Thisbe had thrown a tantrum and pulled up clumps of seaweed in the royal garden, though no one attempted to stop her. The weeds were becoming a nuisance and had to be cleared sooner or later.

Thanos grinned. "Luckily, your parents have a new visitor this evening. Considering who he is, he should be able to keep Thisbe company and make her forget temporarily about Lukas."

Both Clio and Iolanthe made small noises of surprise. On the other side, Delia was laughing at something Lucanus said. Clio wished she could swim to their side, but a glance at Nerissa made her stay where she was.

"Oh, you mean that grouchy old man from land?" Iolanthe said. "I don't see how Thisbe would like his company better if she has a huge crush on Lukas."

"He is no common man," Thanos said, wagging a finger. "He is a fairy. A fairy godfather, to be exact."

"What's a fairy godfather?" Clio asked.

"He bestows gifts on young children. He could make you as beautiful as a butterfly fish or as ugly as an old octopus."

"I think that's amazing," Iolanthe said. "Maybe we should ask him for a spell to keep our hair from tangling in seaweed."

Thanos shrugged. "He looked like a surly character to me. I'm not sure that he'll grant your request unless he is in a good mood."

"There!" Nerissa shouted and pointed upward. "See those lights above? The ship can't be far away."

"All right!" Thanos shouted back. He seemed to be in the habit of taking charge. "Let's go and see the ship. However, it's best not to be seen. We should find a place that is close but not too close to observe the party. Wouldn't want to cause extra trouble for ourselves."

Splash. They surfaced, finding themselves about a whale's length from the ship. Thanos found a jutting rock where they could sit and observe the ship at a reasonably safe distance.

Clio had to admit, if grudgingly, the ship looked magnificent. Colorful streamers entwined the mast, numerous candles encased in tiny glass lamps decorated the sides of the ship, and pots of flowers and ferns adorned the deck. Sounds of chatter and laughter floated in the air, mixed with the mellifluous tunes flowing from the orchestra.

As she lounged on the rock, even her attention was diverted from Lucanus. Human entertainment was not on par with what they had under the sea—in her opinion—but she had to admit it wasn't that bad. The music, for one thing, was catchy and upbeat, making her want to glide around and dance.

"Look at that," Nerissa said, her eyes wide. "Absolutely incredible. See how they cleared out the quarterdeck and decorated it to serve as a dance floor? Oh, and look, they've replaced the figurehead though I have to say the old one was nicer…" She trailed off into an extremely detailed but also extremely boring description of the ship, which was enough to put a hyperactive mer-child to sleep.

"Nerissa," Clio hissed and tugged on her sister's arm. Nerissa never seemed to notice that others weren't interested in her fascination for humans. She truly thought that they were entranced by her speech when, in reality, they were bored to tears. In an attempt to make the conversation more interesting and also in an attempt to prevent Delia from cozying up to Lucanus, Clio tried to change the subject.

"Has the Caladonian prince come out to the deck yet?"

"Well, my dear baby sister," Delia drawled, seeming to place an emphasis on the word baby, "I didn't know you have a taste for human men."

"I do not!" Clio quickly glanced at Lucanus. Luckily, he didn't seem to have heard the conversation. He was gazing at the sky as if anticipating the fireworks. "I was just curious, that's all. I certainly do NOT find two-legged creatures attractive."

"That's his uncle." Thanos pointed out a middle-aged man with a well-trimmed mustache. He was dressed in a stiff suit with a stiff collar and never cracked a smile, despite the merriment unfolding around him. "He's currently acting as regent to the young prince, but it won't be much longer. Lukas has turned twenty-one; his father ascended the throne when he was twenty-three."

While Clio wasn’t as interested in humans as Nerissa, she knew that Caladonia was ruled by the prince’s uncle, Aliksander. Prince Lukas’s mother had died in childbirth, and his father passed away three years later, leaving Alik to rule in his stead.

“Do you think Lukas is up to the challenge?” Iolanthe asked.

“He isn’t as disciplined as his father or uncle,” Lucanus said. “But he is a clever fellow and has an amiable character.”

“You are so knowledgeable,” Delia cooed, “considering how far Caladonia is from your kingdom.”

To Clio’s relief, Lucanus didn’t seem much affected by her praise. “Caladonia may be far away, but their products are popular with us. Their soaps and dyes have been in great demand and can fetch extremely high prices.”

Thanos grinned. “If Thisbe wasn’t so young, we could marry her off to Lukas. She’s already crazy about him.”

“Thanos.” Lucanus narrowed his eyes. “Don’t joke about our sister’s marriage prospects. She’s only nine.”

“All right, all right.” Thanos held up his hands in surrender. “But you have to say it would make a great alliance.”

“Speaking of the human prince.” Lucanus pointed to a tall, lean figure in a white shirt, who had just appeared on the deck. “He has finally made an appearance.”

“Giant sharks, it is him!” Thanos exclaimed.

Clio stared—merkind were blessed with excellent sight. Though far away, she could see the prince was good-looking, but his legs made his movements too stiff and wooden—in her opinion.

“Prince Lukas of Caladonia, celebrating his twenty-first birthday.” Thanos grabbed a rock and made a pretense of toasting in the air. “Let’s drink to Prince Lukas’s health!”

Clio noticed that she hadn’t heard Nerissa make a single comment on the humans. She squinted, but she didn’t see any sign of her sister around the rock.

“Where’s Nerissa?”

“Maybe she wanted to get a closer look,” Delia suggested, “since she’s obviously obsessed with humans.”

Clio hoped it wasn’t the case, but… it was most likely. In the past, there were cases of humans abducting merpeople with fishing nets. Lukas’s

grandfather had signed a peace treaty with her grandfather, forbidding humans from capturing merpeople, but it was always better to be safe than sorry.

“I’m going to find her,” she announced, hoping someone would offer to accompany her, but just at the moment, there was a huge, booming sound in the air. Both Perrine and Delia screamed and latched onto Lucanus’s arms.

“Fireworks!” Thanos exclaimed. “Spectacular, isn’t it?”

Clio waited, but everyone’s attention was on the sky, and to be honest, the fireworks *were* magnificent. Showers of sparks, blooming like a giant sea sponge in the dark sky, made her stare in awe. If she weren’t so worried about her sister, she would have stayed rooted on the spot.

Reluctantly, Clio plunged into the water and began to swim toward the ship. She just had to find Nerissa and bring her back. It wouldn’t take much time.

Sounds of music and laughter grew louder as she approached. Nerissa was bobbing somewhere near the end (or was it the front?) of the ship, jotting furiously on a pad, her face rapt and her eyes shining.

“Nerissa.” Clio swam up to her sister. “What are you doing?”

“Making notes, of course.” Nerissa held up a pale, shimmering scarf. “Look at this! It must be worn by a human female, judging by the bright color. The material is so thin I’m sure it is more for show than practical purposes.”

“You’re too close to the ship. It might be dangerous.” Clio caught her arm. “What if a human sees you?”

Nerissa didn’t seem concerned. “They’re having a party, not a fishing trip.” She pulled out a small dagger. “And if anything really happens, I can use this.” She winked. “I got the idea since you got tangled in kelp that day.”

For a moment, Clio was embarrassed at the memory. “All right, then. But make it quick.”

“Don’t worry about me. Nothing could happen; the humans are in a festive mood.”

Clio waited for a while, but Nerissa showed no intention of returning. Frustrated yet feeling a bit curious as well, Clio swam along the ship, in the direction of the music, so she could hear it better. From her position, she saw several young women clad in bright, colorful dresses, spinning around the deck while others applauded.

“Bravo!”

“Such skill! That was marvelous!”

To be honest, Clio didn’t think much of the women’s dancing skills as they whirled and twirled like spinning tops. Under the sea, she could perform acrobatics that far exceeded the dancers’ skills, but then, she conceded magnanimously, humans couldn’t help but be clunky on legs.

After a while, the ship started to move. Perhaps it was time to return to shore though the fireworks were still exploding in the sky.

Clio was reluctant to see it go, supposing that she would have to wait for a long time until there was another birthday party on the sea. As she turned around to look for Nerissa, she heard a splash.

To her amazement, it was a body. She glanced at the body, and her jaw dropped.

Prince Lukas, his eyes tightly closed and his face deathly pale, had fallen into the water.

3

Giant sharks, the human prince was heavy. He weighed as much as a small whale—not that she had any experience hefting baby whales, but she was quite certain his weight was comparable to one. A baby whale with a gorgeous face and clunky legs…

Was he drunk? Nerissa had mentioned humans liked to drink a kind of ambrosia called wine. Too much wine, and one would end up unconscious.

“Wake up!” She slapped his face, which almost made her loosen her grip on him, as she was only holding him with one arm. Quickly, she wrapped both arms around his body again, cursing the weight of baby whales.

Still no sign of his waking up.

Fireworks were still exploding above, but she couldn’t care less. The ship was moving faster and farther away, and the humans hadn’t noticed their precious prince was missing.

Clio looked back. The jutting rock was devoid of merpeople, and Nerissa had disappeared as well, perhaps expecting she had already returned. If she could dive underwater, she might be able to locate her sister, but she didn’t dare to go down with the prince. He didn’t have gills; he couldn’t survive underwater. She had to get him back to the ship—no, back to land; there was no way she could toss him aboard.

Grumbling and muttering, Clio started swimming to shore, dragging Prince Lukas along. Her arms grew sore from holding him up, and her tail was getting limp from flexing left to right, working against the strong

current of water. Several times, she was forced to stop and rest, panting and heaving, waiting for her tail to regain strength.

By the time she glimpsed rocky land ahead, the ship had completely disappeared. Just her luck—they had anchored it somewhere she couldn't see. Clio cursed under her breath; it looked like she couldn't get rid of the human prince yet.

Panting heavily, she managed to haul him onto shore, her tail frantically digging into sand and shells. Collapsing next to him, Clio only had one thought in her mind: wait until somebody discovered the prince. She was not going to drag him all along the shore, looking for the ship. It was already a miracle she'd made it this far.

She didn't know how much time passed as the lapping waves eased her mind and made her fall asleep, but when she opened her eyes, dawn was breaking over the horizon. Misty clouds hung in the sky, the mellow glow of the sun reflecting over the peaceful waters.

Prince Lukas remained lying on the sand, in the same place she'd left him. Now the day was lighter, she could get a good look at him. For a moment, her heart skipped a traitorous beat. Up close, he was even better looking. Sable hair framed a handsome face with a strong jaw and aristocratic nose, his damp shirt making the sleek lines of his upper torso more pronounced.

Clio clapped her hands on her temples and shook her head. Lucanus was way better than this useless human, who was stupid enough to get himself drowned on his birthday.

The sun climbed higher. She was getting impatient by now, and her stomach was complaining. Dragging the prince to shore last night had made her tired and hungry.

"Wake up, you oaf," she growled.

No response. She shook him, but he remained unconscious, and then she remembered something Nerissa had said about humans drowning.

"There's an extraordinary method humans use when they try to revive a person who's drowning," Nerissa had said. "I'll bet none of you can guess how." When her siblings and cousins suggested various methods, from thumping on the head to setting fire under the nose, Nerissa shook her head.

"Kissing."

Everyone was shocked. Were the humans a secret degenerate bunch while pretending to be prudes?

“Yes, that’s how they save someone who drowned. They kiss and deliver air to the drowning person.”

Some shook their heads in disgust while others found it highly amusing. Kostas, her brother, began joking how he wanted to come across a drowning human girl so he could kiss her without being reprimanded.

Clio glanced at Lukas. Would it really work? Her stomach growled louder this time.

She wiggled across the sand, took a deep breath, and placed her mouth over his.

It was a strange sensation touching a man’s lips. When she had imagined her first kiss, she always had a romantic notion of doing it with someone like Lucanus, who would draw her close, probably behind a rock, his arms around her and her hair floating around like a cloud. But in this case, it wasn’t romantic at all because she was trying to deliver air to a human who wasn’t even aware of the kiss…

His eyes fluttered open. Giant sharks, his eyes were beautiful—a stunning crystal blue with rays of white, pale and clear. No wonder Thisbe was crazy about him.

The next second, she pulled away, completely mortified. She wriggled behind a rock as fast as she could, dreading he’d speak to her.

Clio waited. She peeked at the prince, who gradually pushed himself to a sitting position and was blinking in confusion.

“Prince Lukas!”

“Where are you?”

The humans had finally arrived. With a lightened heart, Clio dived into the water and swam away.

4

"That one. No, sorry, Perrine has a similar dress. Get me the white one."

Clio puckered her forehead as she stared at several outfits draped on rocky racks, trying to decide what was the best way to dress up to her advantage. Her personal maid, an octopus, plucked off the last one Clio pointed at. Her eight legs made it especially handy when finding pieces for Clio to wear. The octopus handed Clio the dress and ambled to the dresser, where an assortment of accessories was laid out.

Clio slipped on the milky-white dress and surveyed herself in the pearl-encrusted mirror. Yes. White went well with her ash-blond hair, and the collar had a generous cut that showed just enough skin to be tantalizing but not too revealing.

Her octopus maid handed her a bunch of hairpins studded with pearls that Clio herself had harvested, along with Clio's favorite coral necklace. The pendant was made of high-quality red coral, carved into a rose, and it hung from a sparkling golden chain. The rosy red color lent a warm glow to her pale skin, complementing her white dress and blond hair.

Pretty, though nowhere as glamorous as her elder sisters—but this was the best result she could hope for. For the rest, she would have to rely on her charm and grace.

Clio took a deep breath. "Wish me luck."

UNLIKE HUMANS, WHO PREFERRED TO MOVE HORIZONTALLY THROUGH doors, mer-dwellings consisted of a vertical construction with lifting or sliding trapdoors, which were more suited for their gliding motions in the water. For Clio, her rooms consisted of three levels—the bottom level was her bedroom; the second her everyday room, where she spent most of her time; and the top level her sitting room, which was considered the equivalent of the humans' parlor.

Clio swam upward, passing her everyday room and reaching the sitting room. She lifted the trapdoor on the ceiling of the sitting room and emerged into the larger common area she shared with her siblings.

"Where're you going?" Kostas raised his eyebrows. "You look like a ghost gliding around in white."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Clio glared at him and smoothed the front of her dress. "You're one to talk. Didn't Perrine say you dressed like a clownfish on Father's birthday?"

"Trying to impress a merman you like?" He made wheeing noises in an exaggerated imitation of a ghost. "You're going to scare him away instead of attracting him."

Clio chucked a large conch in the direction of his stomach and swam away, thoroughly irritated. Kostas always made fun of his siblings, but he particularly enjoyed teasing her because she would fight back. Nerissa, on the other hand, usually let the jabs and barbs slide, so Kostas didn't bug her as much. If Clio had learned to keep her temper, she might have reduced the chance of him provoking her, but she was too young and hotheaded to keep calm.

She asked a servant where the second-eldest Pelagosian prince was, received an answer, and headed to the gardens. They were huge—a veritable maze of seaweed and seagrass, vibrant coral reefs, and rocky caves and tunnels. She swam around, dodging a fleet of blue-and-yellow angelfish and soaring over a giant squid, until she found him hovering above a magnificent coral reef with so many colors it almost hurt her eyes.

Trying to calm her pounding heart, Clio glided over to him.

"Lucanus," she called.

He turned around and gave her a brief nod. "Clio. Are you not tired from returning late last night?"

He got her name right this time, and he was inquiring after her health. Those were signs of encouragement. Definitely.

Clio swam closer, clasping her hands together. “I am… I just…”

He waited.

Just say it! her mind screamed. If she didn’t take the initiative, he was going to return to Pelagos in a few days.

“Would you… interested… gowime?”

He frowned. “Could you say that again?”

“Go with me,” she blurted then mentally punched herself for being so forthright—as if she were making him follow her orders. “I mean, there’s a dance tomorrow night, and if you don’t mind, we could go together.”

Silence. With bated breath, Clio raised her gaze from the ocean floor to his eyes. He looked slightly surprised, but when he spoke, her heart felt as if it was sinking to the bottom of the deepest trench of the ocean.

“I’m sorry. Delia already invited me to partner with her.”

She should have seen it coming. She was a fool to ask him this late—of course her sister would have gotten to him first.

Turning away so he wouldn’t see the tears prickling in her eyes, Clio squeezed out the words from her throat, “Okay. No problem, I just thought… Well, fine.”

With a flick of her tail, she swam away from him in quick, rapid strokes, not wanting to stay in his presence any longer. It had taken her so much courage to get up the nerve to ask him. If only she were bolder, more confident, she might have had a chance.

Wandering farther into the garden, she stopped near a colorful reef.

“You look troubled,” a voice said.

Puzzled, Clio whirled around. She didn’t recognize that voice. She had grown up in the palace, and not a single merman’s or mermaid’s voice, whether it might be screeching or wailing, would be unfamiliar.

It was a man wearing a long flowing cloak, but two bare feet peeked from the hem, and he was floating lazily somewhere above a clump of sea sponges.

“You’re human,” she said, startled. “But how did you survive underwater?” Humans could swim, but they couldn’t keep their head underwater for long, certainly not in waters so deep.

“I may look human, but I’m not.”

Realization dawned. “You’re the fairy who arrived yesterday. You are…”

“Mortimer. And who are you? One of the princesses?”

Clio nodded. “I’m the youngest. My name is Clio.”

He glided toward her—she wondered how he managed to move without a tail. That was when she noticed a pair of large fins flapping behind his back.

“Oh, this.” Mortimer smirked. “This is a really useful spell that allows me to stay underwater.”

“Wow.” Clio was impressed. “Can you make us grow legs?” she asked, thinking of Nerissa. Her sister would be ecstatic if she could become a human for a day.

“Of course.” He puffed out his chest. “There’s nothing I can’t accomplish. Do you want legs? Was that what was troubling you?”

“Not really, but…” Clio hesitated. “Can you create a spell that would help, um, make one more attractive?”

“Ha!” Mortimer looked as though he had won a toss of Fins and Tails. “I just knew it!” He wagged a long bony finger at her. “You want to impress some good-for-nothing boy.”

Clio blushed. “No! I mean, I just—”

“No fear, I can create just the spell for you,” Mortimer interrupted. “It might even be enough of a challenge to be interesting.” He stopped and frowned at her. “But don’t you go getting any ideas about calling me every time you think a spell will solve your problems. I get enough of that from those nuisances on land. You just happen to be in luck on this occasion—I’m behind on my wish quota this month, and the last thing I need is the Fairy Council giving me a hard time. Now, what’s the name of this boy?”

If he were a relative or a friend, she wouldn’t have told him. But somehow, she found it less frightening, less inhibiting, confiding to a stranger, a visitor who would be gone soon. And one who obviously had no real interest in her life. Plus those fins did look impressive—she didn’t know any creature on land who could survive under the sea.

“Don’t tell anyone,” she made him promise. “It’s Lu… ca… nus.” Her voice died away at the last syllable as she blushed furiously. She couldn’t believe she’d actually told a stranger about her crush.

“The prince!” Mortimer looked at her in a sort of appraising manner. “Yeah, I can see why you have trouble.”

Rub salt in the wound, would you? Clio thought. She knew she paled in comparison to her sisters, but he could have been subtler about it.

“Don’t worry. I know just the thing to do. Just give me a few hours to concoct the spell. Now, give me a piece from your scales.”

“A scale?”

“Yes, it’s required for the spell. But don’t panic. My magic will transform you completely. He won’t be able to take his eyes off you!”

Clio was a bit skeptical, but if all that was needed was a piece of scale… She raised her tail and peeled off a glittering piece. It hurt a little, but she knew the scale would grow back soon.

“Are you sure this will make him notice me?”

“Of course,” he snapped. “I’m the best fairy inventor on land.” Mortimer slipped the scale into his pocket. “There’s no magic I can’t do. I’ll be back in a few hours.”

He glided away, his fins flapping in the water. Clio returned to her rooms, elated.

About an hour later, Mortimer descended into her sitting room, carrying a smoking goblet.

“There you go, Princess. Drink up.”

5

Clio shifted, feeling warm sand cushioning her body. Rays of sunlight washed over her skin, drenching her in more warmth, making her want to stretch and yawn.

Wait… Sand? Since when had she swum to land?

Her eyes flew open. She was lying, belly up, on the same sandy beach where she'd dumped Prince Lukas a few days ago. She raised a hand to shield her eyes from the sun and noticed grains of sand sticking on her lovely white dress.

Annoyed, Clio sat up. She almost keeled over in shock.

Her tail! Her beautiful, sturdy, turquoise tail covered with glistening scales, was gone. In its place were two legs, slender and shapely, but it wouldn't have mattered if they resembled elephant legs. She wanted her tail.

Horrified, Clio opened her mouth to release a string of curses and received a second shock. All that came out from her throat was a dull, indistinct noise, like hitting two rocks together. No matter how she tried to utter a word, nothing came out. She had lost her voice.

"How does it feel?"

Clio looked up. Mortimer stood behind her, looking smug. "Look how perfectly your legs turned out! Ten toes, not one more or less. No human will be able to tell you're not one of them."

What? Clio wanted to yell, but all she could do was gesture wildly with her hands.

“Ah.” Mortimer scratched his head. “I suppose your voice was taken when the spell took effect. Sometimes it happens—the magic needs a sacrifice to give you something new.”

Clio felt like hyperventilating. She slapped her thighs, trying to convey she’d never asked for legs in the beginning, but Mortimer didn’t seem to get it.

“Well, at least you’ll be able to charm the prince. Can’t do that when you could only wriggle and flail around with that tail. Now you’re human, you’ll have less trouble winning his heart. Especially with those perfect legs I’ve given you.”

A sickening dread swept over her as she gradually came to realize what he meant. Since she wasn’t able to speak, Clio stuck out her forefinger and drew on the sand. *Do you mean Lukas?*

“Who else?”

I meant Lucanus, not the human prince, you moron!

Mortimer looked as if he’d swallowed a jellyfish. “Lucanus? Who’s Lucanus?”

The second eldest Pelagosian prince! Clio felt like screaming, but since she couldn’t scream, she punched on the ground, sending sand flying everywhere.

Change me back. Now!

“Er…” Mortimer didn’t meet her eyes. “That might be a problem. Reversing another fairy’s magic is hard enough, but reversing my own…”

Clio stared at him in horror. *You can’t change me back?*

“Well, er, I wouldn’t go so far as to say *can’t*…”

She narrowed her eyes. *Are you trying to say you don’t know how?*

He drew himself up. “I’m saying it will require study. I’ll need to return to my lab.”

Then go! I don’t want to be human.

Mortimer looked reluctant, as if he weren’t entirely convinced he could figure it out, or possibly just didn’t want to be bothered trying. “Why don’t you consider Prince Lukas instead? From what I’ve heard, he’s extremely popular in Caladonia. And if you become queen, it will be a great opportunity for your kingdom to form an alliance…”

Clio grabbed a fistful of sand and threw it in his face. Mortimer sputtered and coughed. Just a while ago, she had regarded him with awe,

believing him to be powerful and capable. Now, with sand stuck in his hair, he looked pathetic. Useless.

"All right," he said sulkily. "I'll return to my lab. But it'll take time."

What about my voice?

"If I can work out how to reverse the spell, you should get your voice back as well as your tail." Mortimer glanced in the direction of something in the distance, and his expression changed. "I'd better be off. And I suppose the Fairy Council will expect me to let your folks know you're here, too." He shuffled off toward the water, muttering to himself. "Although I don't know why I'm supposed to go out of my way given you're as ungrateful as the rest of them…"

His words trailed off as he entered the water. In no time, he disappeared, leaving a trail of bubbles on the surface. She was left with nothing but the peaceful sound of waves lapping the sand.

Clio glared at his retreating figure for a while. If only she could do magic, she would toss him into the sea after clipping his fins. He thought he was being helpful, but instead she was mired in the biggest mess of her life. How was she to survive on land when she didn't know a soul?

Alarmed, she tried to wriggle to the sea, but her legs weren't suited for wriggling. And then she remembered she couldn't survive underwater now. Even if her family tried to help her, there wasn't much they could do on land.

Sounds of humans talking came closer. Panicking, she looked for a rock to hide behind, but her new body wouldn't let her move quickly. A man appeared just as she was caught in a most awkward position. Her body was in an S-shaped curve as she tried to glide across the sand like a sea snake, but she instead looked like a salmon out of water.

Her eyes widened, and her first thought was to bury her head in the sand. Prince Lukas was staring at her, amazed.

He looked a lot less pathetic now than when she'd saved him from drowning. His blue eyes were bright, alert, and glowing. The wind blew, ruffling his rich, dark hair, which was no longer sodden and limp but framed his face in a roguish fashion. His torso was just as broad and muscular as Lucanus's though the clunky legs spoiled the effect. If only he had a tail, why, he could be a serious contender for her crush.

"Have we met?" His voice slid over her like ambrosia. His body might be well honed like Lucanus's, but there was nothing in his demeanor that

resembled her crush. “Pardon me, but your face seems familiar.”

She shook her head without thinking. She had no idea how he’d react if he knew she was a mermaid-turned-human.

Clio tried to stand—she couldn’t lie there forever—and promptly fell. Great sharks, how do humans remain upright on such flimsy limbs? Her new feet had such a tiny imprint on the sand—they seemed incapable of supporting her body weight. She tried again and wobbled, but this time, a strong arm caught her around the waist, trying to assist her to stand properly.

“My apologies.” Lukas’s deep voice sounded above her head. “But you seem to be in trouble. Did you twist your ankle? Or did your legs go numb?”

He let her go, and she stumbled again, landing on the ground in a heap.

“Lukas!” Another man arrived. He had an egg-shaped head and was completely bald, but his face was young. He was slightly taller than Lucanus, shoulders equally broad, but his arms were thicker and more muscular. “What are you doing—who’s that?”

“I don’t know. I just found her on the sand.” Lukas peered at her closely. “Do you have any folks nearby who can help you?”

Clio nearly turned her gaze to the sea. She shook her head.

“Is she ill?” Baldie asked, glancing at her wobbly legs. “Best get her to the palace and have a doctor examine her.”

Lukas was still gazing at her, frowning, but he nodded. “May I know your name?”

Clio opened her mouth, and that dull, cringeworthy sound came out again.

“She’s mute,” Baldie said. “Pity. She’s a pretty little thing.”

Lukas gestured. “Your cloak, Martin.”

Clio stared when the prince handed her a long, loose garment.

“Tie it around your waist,” he said. “It’s… chilly.”

She didn’t feel the least bit chilled. Yet at the same time, she realized that she had only her dress, which barely reached her thighs, and that human women always wore clothing to cover their lower torsos. The dancers on the deck that night had worn skirts that reached their ankles.

She fastened the cloak around her waist and did her best to walk. With the prince and Martin supporting her with strong arms, they made slow but steady progress toward the palace.

As the sea grew farther and farther away, Clio vowed that next time she saw Mortimer, she would strangle him with the strongest seaweed she could find.

6

Twenty. Soon to be twenty-one.

Clio was frustrated at herself. From the shore to their destination, she had stumbled twenty times already.

"She seems exhausted," Lukas said. "And it's getting dark already."

"I can carry her."

"I found her, Martin. Haven't you heard that finders are carriers?"

"You're making that up."

"Of course I am." Lukas grinned. "Pardon me, lady, but this way is quicker."

The next second, the prince lifted her from the ground, carrying her bridal-style. Clio gasped. Her first thought was to struggle, but as he took a few steps forward, she reconsidered. She had been stumbling so many times, she might as well relax and save her strength. Besides, she remembered how sore her arms and tail had been when she dragged him to shore. Let him return the favor.

Martin glanced at her, looking rather surprised that she hadn't attempted to struggle.

"Looks like this one has fallen under your charm."

The corners of Lukas's mouth tucked upward. "As usual, there are very few women who can resist my charm."

Without thinking, Clio thumped his chest, drawing a surprised grunt from him.

Glaring at him, she thought, *If only I could talk, I'd tell you not to be so arrogant. The only reason I'm letting you carry me is because I can't walk.*

After a while, Clio decided to turn her head and look around instead of facing Lukas's chest. Her eyes widened.

They were approaching a white-stone building, a building that she had heard her parents talk about but had only seen from afar—the summer residence of the royal family of Caladonia. The most she had seen of it was a distant outline when she was playing on the sand with her siblings. Up close, it was spectacular—massive blue domes over square bases, rounded arches, golden spires, and the windows laid with glass mosaics.

And now, she was not only going to see how beautiful it looked close up, but she was also going to see the interior. Even though she wasn't as crazy about humans as her sister, Clio was curious to see how the humans lived indoors.

Two burly guards opened a large marble door for them, and they were carrying swords strapped to their belts. She was admiring the colored marble flooring and the walls adorned with frescoes when several shrill, angry voices broke through the air.

"Who's that?"

"What are you doing, Your Highness?"

"It's a girl! Where is she from?"

Lukas turned around, and Clio was greeted with a trio of young ladies, all of them beautifully dressed and wearing identical looks of amazement.

"Lukas, what are you doing with that girl?"

He grinned. "Can't you tell? I've lost my heart completely."

The trio of ladies gasped. Clio would have done the same, but she couldn't speak. All she could do was wiggle and squirm in Lukas's arms to tell him to let her down, but he merely tightened his arms around her.

"We found her on the shore," Martin said, irritation in his voice. Whether he was irritated by the ladies or jealous of the attention they paid the prince, Clio couldn't tell. "She has sprained her foot or something, and she can't walk."

"But did he have to carry her? You could have done the same."

Martin shrugged.

"We have to get her to the doctor," Lukas said, adjusting his hold on Clio's body. "If you would kindly step aside, I would like to see her properly treated."

And before the others could utter another word, he strode away. Clio felt mortified. She didn't know much about human customs, but Nerissa

had informed her there were strict rules in the royal family. Why was he oblivious to the fact that he was carrying her in his arms?

"Almost there," Lukas said, as if sensing her frustration. "You have just a moment more to enjoy my embrace."

Clio thumped his chest again.

A moment later, they arrived at what looked like the healer's office. An elderly doctor examined Clio's foot, feeling over her ankle and flexing her joints. He tried to ask her a few questions, found that she couldn't speak, and handed her a notebook and pencil. Clio gripped the pencil in relief. Finally, she could communicate in a more civilized manner.

"Do you feel any pain in your feet? Or any part of your body?"

No, but I'm very tired.

"Were you able to walk before?"

Not wanting to appear like an invalid, Clio wrote, *Yes.*

After a few more questions, the doctor cleared his throat. "I don't think there is anything wrong with her. She looks perfectly healthy to me, unless she is suffering from an unknown disease." He let go of Clio's foot. "Suppose you stand up and take a few steps, my dear."

Clio took a step, wobbled, took another step, then her knees crumbled.

"Strange," the doctor said, stroking his beard. "If there is no pain and she can point her toes, I really don't see why she cannot walk."

"Perhaps she was merely exhausted from a long bout of swimming," Lukas said, frowning. "I'm sure that after we let her rest for a while, she'll be able to move around with ease."

"And she appears to be mute as well. Where is she from?" the doctor asked. "A new girl you have employed?"

"She is visiting from another kingdom," Lukas said lightly, "but for now, let her rest."

The doctor gave Clio a cane. When Clio looked puzzled and accidentally poked his stomach with it, he explained she was to use the cane to support her walk. He also gave her the notebook, telling her to come to him if her walking problem worsened.

In the hallway, Lukas asked Martin to summon the housekeeper. Clio leaned on her cane. While she felt that she was getting more used to walking, she still felt a bit disoriented. She was used to gliding effortlessly across water, but every step she took now required her to press into the floor, something she had never done before.

Within minutes, a plump woman wearing a huge apron appeared. She looked at Clio with suspicion.

“You called me, Your Highness?”

“Indeed I did, Hermia,” Lukas said, smiling. “This damsel needs a room to stay in. Please have the spare room prepared for her.”

The housekeeper scrunched up her nose. “The spare room?”

“But of course. The one that’s in the same corridor as my own bedroom.”

The housekeeper looked scandalized, as if it was ridiculous that Lukas should request that Clio be placed so close to his own bedroom.

“But that’s only one door away from your bedroom, Your Highness. That is highly inappropriate.”

Clio glanced at the prince. To her surprise, he was still smiling as if the housekeeper’s alarm was a daily occurrence.

“I know you must be concerned for any devious designs on my virtue. Don’t worry, I’ll keep my door locked all night. She won’t have any chance of ambushing me and harming my sterling reputation.”

The housekeeper looked as if he were crazy. “That is not what I meant! My concern was for this maid’s reputation, not yours.”

“There are also locks on her door,” Martin interrupted. “Have some faith in our prince. He may like to joke around, but has he really done anything that would cause his uncle concern?”

“All right, calm down, Hermia.” Lukas held up his hands. “Let her stay on the far end of the corridor, with a dozen rooms in between. Would that be decent enough for you?”

The housekeeper narrowed her eyes but shrugged. “If your uncle asks, don’t blame me.” She gestured at Clio. “Come along, miss.”

Clio hobbled along on her cane, feeling clumsy and stupid. She was shown to her bedroom, which was much smaller than her own room under the sea—how could one swoop and dive in such a tiny place? Then she remembered she didn’t have a tail and couldn’t swoop and dive anyway.

Her shoulders drooped, and for the umpteenth time, she wished she had never told Mortimer about her crush.

“Do you like it?” Lukas asked behind her.

Clio didn’t answer. The room was pretty—the walls were painted in the pale hue of a pink conch, the mirror was framed with shells of different

shapes and sizes, and the furniture looked pretty though she wasn't sure how to use it.

But it wasn't home. She longed for her own massive room under the sea, with its coral decorations and Zooey bouncing around in the top level.

"Over here."

The prince walked over to the curtains and pulled them apart, revealing a spectacular view of the sea.

Clio gasped. She hobbled over to him, drinking in the sight with hungry eyes. She had never seen the sea like this, orange and golden clouds scattered through the coral-red sky, a few boats bobbing gently on the waves. She had never seen the sea from this angle, and giant sharks, wasn't it beautiful.

She turned to him, wanting to let him know she fully appreciated the view, her eyes sparkling. For a moment, the prince blinked, then looked away.

"I suppose it is to your liking. That's good."

Footsteps echoed outside. Martin appeared, and he had to stoop when entering the room. "The regent wants to see you, Your Highness."

Regent? Clio then remembered that Lukas had not yet become the ruler of Caladonia. Currently, it was his uncle acting as a substitute.

"By the way, what is your name? Can you write it out?"

Clio spelled out her name.

"Clio," he said slowly, as if savoring the word on his tongue. She didn't like the way he said her name. It shouldn't have sounded so intimate.

"If you need anything, just call Hermia. She will see that you are supplied with anything you need."

He left, though the reluctance was evident on his face.

Clio, however, was glad to be rid of him. When the door clicked shut behind him, she took her time to explore the room. She had fun draping her body over the chairs in various positions, not knowing the human way to sit. She opened a door, expecting another room, but it was filled with clothes. She rinsed her face using a basin and wondered why the water wasn't salty.

When she sat on the bed and lay down, she could almost melt into the blanket, so soft and warm and comfortable it was. She wondered if it was possible to purchase the same bedding when she got back home. For a

moment, she did nothing but roll over and over the bed, reveling in the sensation that came closest to her swimming.

Soon, she fell asleep, dreaming of trussing up Mortimer and dropping him on top of a spouting whale.

7

Clio woke up to find herself lying on the floor, blankets tangled in her newly acquired legs. In her sleep, she had somehow fallen off the bed and rolled over the floor.

"Goodness me! How did you land yourself over there?"

Hermia stood in the doorway, a pile of clothes in her arms. She tossed the clothes on the bed and came to where Clio lay in a rather awkward heap between the fireplace and the sofa. She was nowhere near the bed.

"If you were cold, all you had to do was ask for more blankets. You didn't have to crawl in front of the fireplace, for heavens' sake."

That's because I've never slept in a bed so small! Don't humans roll over and over while they sleep?

"And it's late." Hermia pulled the curtains apart in a quick, fluid motion. Clio sat up, her breath literally taken away by the view. The turquoise waters glittered and shimmered under the sun, and the sky was painted the same color as the cerulean domes of the palace. A seagull swooped in the air—the whiteness of its feathers stood out against the blue sky.

"Get up, and get dressed."

Clio looked for her walking stick—fortunately, it was propped next to the fireplace. She hobbled to the bed and scanned the clothes, trying to decide which one to wear. Most of them looked weird; she had no idea how she was going to put them on.

Can you recommend which would be a good fit on me?

Hermia looked as if Clio announced she wanted to go naked. “You have to wear all of them, Miss Clio.”

Clio’s eyes bulged. She’d look like a puffer fish if she put on that small mountain of layered silk and velvet.

Her amazement continued as Hermia fitted item after item on her new human body: petticoats, shirt, tunic, skirt, belt, stockings, and shoes. The material was smooth and comfortable, the colors pleasing, the ornamental lace and silk attractive, but when everything was put together, she wanted to scream. The worst was the corset, a nasty thing that reminded her of a cage, squeezing her ribs like a giant squid suffocating its prey with its tentacles.

Once Hermia let her go, Clio grabbed her notebook and wrote furiously, *Can’t breathe. Why must I wear this?*

Hermia looked shocked. “But you must! How else will your bosom defy gravity?”

Clio felt like tearing her hair out, but she couldn’t mess up her elaborate hairstyle. Hermia had taken pains to fashion her ash-blond hair into an intricate mass of braids and curls, which made her look and feel elegant. It was the only thing that she truly appreciated about her human appearance. Before she returned to sea, she’d have to ask Hermia to teach her how to do the hairstyle.

Clio spent the morning hobbling around the room with her cane. Might as well practice how to walk, because she was tired of stumbling around, arms flailing like a human who couldn’t swim, knees buckling as if they were formed of the body mass from a jellyfish.

Hours later, she collapsed on a chair by the window. For a moment, she gazed outside at the rolling waves, at the seagulls swooping through the air, feeling at peace, but that peaceful moment didn’t last long. Suddenly, she jerked up, almost falling off the chair.

A head had popped up between the waves. Nerissa was waving at her.

Completely shocked, Clio gestured wildly, hoping that Nerissa would get the message. *Duck under the water,* she tried to signal. *Don’t let the humans discover you.*

Clio hastened from the room as fast as she could manage on her cane. She bumped into Hermia on the way, who looked surprised. Clio hastily dashed off *I need fresh air* on her notebook. Luckily, everyone was busy during midmorning and could care less about her doings.

Nerissa was floating on her back when Clio arrived. When she heard Clio approach, she flipped over and grinned.

“Giant sharks, look at you! The dress, the hair… You look absolutely stunning. The humans have been treating you well.”

Clio rolled her eyes, wrote in her notebook, and thrust it in Nerissa’s face.

I’ll swap you any time. Try hobbling around on a cane and making stupid noises when you want to speak.

“It’s not going to be permanent,” Nerissa said without an ounce of sympathy. “Think of it as an adventure, sis. How many of us get to experience such a different life?”

Don’t you know how uncomfortable these clothes are?

“They’re gorgeous! The shade of red of your gown brings out the milky-white luster of your face, and the embroidery on the hem is absolutely exquisite. Giant sharks, I know Delia would give a fortune to have a gown like this. And is that a corset you’re wearing? I’ve read that all human women have to wear one so they can keep their waists slender and the torso upright…”

Clio wrote quickly before Nerissa could ask her to unbutton her top and show her the corset. *I suppose everyone knows about my legs now. How are Papa and Mama taking it?*

Some of the excitement faded from her sister’s eyes. “Papa yelled at the fairy and wanted to rip off his fins, but Mortimer’s magic is no joke. He produced something he called a shield. Papa’s fist just bounced back. But the fairy assured us that you’ll be fine. He already asked the human prince to look after you.”

Clio dropped her notebook, mortification sweeping through her like a huge wave. When did he talk to Lukas? What if Mortimer mentioned her secret crush to Lukas? She could imagine Mortimer having such a conversation with Lukas:

Mortimer: “Listen, there’s a dumb girl lying on the beach at the moment. She’s actually a mermaid.”

Lukas: “Impossible! Wait…why are you telling me this?”

Mortimer: “She fancies you and begged me to give her legs. I don’t understand what she sees in you, but since she’s here, you’d better treat her well. Her father is the king of Thalassa.”

Lukas, with an I-just-knew-it smirk: “Of course.”

She clenched her fists with only one thought in her mind: *I'm going to KILL that stupid fairy when I see him.*

"Looks like Mortimer was right." Nerissa grinned. "You look fabulous, just like any human lady. Papa and Mama won't have to worry about you. But how did you get transformed in the first place? I thought you weren't that interested in the people on land."

On another day, Clio would have rather sewed her mouth shut than reveal her crush on Lucanus, but considering her dramatic situation, she swallowed her pride and wrote out how she'd told Mortimer about her unrequited crush and how he misunderstood.

Nerissa's eyes widened. "I'm sorry, sis. I never suspected you liked Lucanus—you always seemed so quiet when he's around."

Because I was a wimp, Clio thought bitterly. *I should never have asked for a fairy to help me in the first place.*

Nerissa patted her shoulder. "I'll look up in the library if there's a solution to this curse. You're not the first mermaid who got turned into a human—there was a story about one of our ancestors who fell in love with a human man. I'll look it up and see if there's something that can help you. Meanwhile, can you do me a favor? Please?"

Clio groaned when Nerissa got that starry-eyed look. She knew it was going to be something she wouldn't like.

"Describe to me the interior of the palace? I've been dying to know how the humans live in those rooms. Such as the throne room, the ballroom, the conservatory…"

Do you think I could go traipsing around and making notes? I can't even walk without stumbling.

"Get the human prince to help you," Nerissa said indifferently. "You saved his life. It's not a big deal to ask him to show you around."

Clio made a face. Things were already bad enough given he probably had the wrong idea about her having a crush on him.

But Nerissa, oblivious to her worries, produced a small anglerfish figurine crudely carved from wood.

"This will alert you when I need to talk to you. Mortimer put a spell on this. The light on top of the fish will glow when I'm surfacing, so you'll know when to expect me."

Impressive. If only Mortimer used his magic properly, she'd be thanking him on bended tail—er, knee—instead of wanting to strangle him.

8

For the next few days, Clio learned how to walk. It was incredibly frustrating—her knees were bruised, her bum sore, and worst of all, she couldn't go anywhere without making an annoying thunk, thunk with her cane, making everyone in the palace stop and stare.

Patience, she told herself. Nerissa had said human babies didn't learn how to walk until they were a year old. Mer-babies, on the other hand, could float a few hours after birth and were able to swim around in days, which was yet another thing that proved merpeople were superior.

Sometimes Lukas came to her room, a smile on his handsome—no, irritating—face, and offered to be her walking cane. When Clio initially accepted his offer, he slid an arm around her waist, making her lean on him and inhale his masculine scent. Since then, she always refused to let him help her walk.

Her heart belonged to Lucanus, and she certainly didn't want to fall for this flirtatious human prince, especially when he was part of the reason she'd ended up voiceless and tailless. Never mind that Mortimer was the chief culprit to blame.

About a week after she arrived at the Caladonian palace, Clio progressed to walking without a cane. She could put out her foot, each step firm and stable, but her gait was atrocious. In Hermia's words, Clio resembled a duck waddling, feet turned out, shoulders hunched. That was even worse than using a cane, in her opinion, but Clio didn't care. Tired of being cooped up in her tiny bedroom for days, she decided it was time to get out.

On a bright, sunny morning, Clio set off. She shuffled down the corridor, occasionally pausing to lean against the marble pillars along the way. Sunlight filtered through windows carved high above, where the arches met the ceiling, flooding the interior of the palace with a mellow glow.

“Look at her!” A high-pitched, girly voice sounded in the air. “Doesn’t she look odd with her feet pointed out?”

It was the trio of beautifully dressed ladies who were scandalized when Lukas brought her to the palace on the first day. Now, they looked at her as if she were a starfish wedged between two rocks.

“Never have I seen such an ugly way of walking.”

“Maybe she had a disease which caused her to become deformed. Quick, let’s get out of here in case she infects us…”

The trio turned and disappeared down the corridor, tittering. Such maturity. Clio rolled her eyes and wished she were back in the sea.

As she reached the end of the corridor, she came to a flight of winding stairs leading downward. She almost felt like sinking into a heap on the ground. Why were humans so incompetent? Couldn’t they invent something that could carry a person from floor to floor?

A door opened on her left. A man in his late forties strode out and frowned when he saw her hunched in the corner, gazing at the steps as if they were a dark deep-sea trench.

“Who are…? Oh. You’re that knock-kneed waif my nephew brought home.”

Clio bristled, imagining placing a spiky sea urchin in his chair. Most of his hair was gray, but the parts that weren’t were a similar shade to Lukas’s sable hair. A closer look, and she recognized him from the ship, the man who looked as though he never had fun in his life—Aliksander, Lukas’s uncle and regent of Caladonia.

“Can’t speak, I see.” The man’s frown grew deeper. “But Lukas said you can write. Where are you from, miss?”

Clio shook her head, wanting to get away. However, he repeated his question, clearly intending not to let her leave until she answered. With an inward sigh, she pulled out her notebook.

A small coastal village far from here.

“Where are your folks? Aren’t they worried about you?”

My sister knows I am here. She is off doing research at sea. I am waiting to rejoin her when she returns.

"Hmph." Alik didn't seem to believe her. "I see that my nephew has spent a lot on you. Hermia told me he insisted on letting you stay in a room normally reserved for royal guests." The regent folded his arms. "Lukas said you saved his life. There's no reason that he would lie, but I find it hard to believe. You look barely capable of lifting a dog, not to mention a grown man."

Clio was tempted to write that she found it hard to believe as well. It was a miracle that she'd managed to haul Lukas to shore.

"I have no idea why you turned up suddenly, but my nephew seems to trust you." Alik stepped closer. "Don't you try anything funny, girl. If I find you've been toying with him or have dishonorable intentions, I'll have you banished from Caladonia."

Footsteps echoed on the stairs. Prince Lukas appeared, his questioning gaze landing on them.

"Uncle? What are you doing with Clio?"

Alik narrowed his eyes, as if he disapproved of Lukas calling her by her first name.

"Nothing important," he said pleasantly. Clio marveled how he could switch from menacing to smiling in instant. He would be a star actor in a play. "Just a friendly chat with your little friend here."

Lukas turned to Clio, a teasing grin tugging on the ends of his lips. "Don't let him scare you, Clio. He might look intimidating, but he's really a softie at heart."

Alik's eye twitched. "Did you come to see me?"

"Actually, I came to see how Clio was doing. No offense, Uncle, but she is way prettier than you."

More eye twitching. "Don't forget your duties, lad. I expect a full report on Areopolis's new aqueduct tomorrow."

Alik gave Clio a curt nod and went back to his room. Clio watched him disappear, thinking that Alik was not what she expected. He behaved more like a paranoid mother than a jolly, paternal figure.

Whatever. Lukas's uncle shouldn't have anything to worry about. Her eyes were only for Lucanus, and she was certainly not going to fall for a two-legged flirt.

9

"Clio, you look absolutely stunning," Lukas commented, appreciation evident from the sparkle in his eyes. "The perfect balm for my sore eyes. Glad to see that you've finally decided to leave your cave."

Clio glared. It wasn't that she didn't want to leave, but she couldn't. She had to wait until she could ditch the cane. She was tired of thumping around and making people jump.

He held out his arm. "Fancy taking a walk with me?"

She didn't. He was such a flirt, and she didn't want to cause rumors to spread. Already, she had heard of maids talking about how the prince had brought a strange mute girl and insisted on letting her stay in the palace. Naturally, they gossiped how the prince had to be infatuated, or why go to such lengths for a stranger?

But she could do worse than reject his offer. What if she got lost wandering around? Besides, Nerissa had asked her to describe the palace interior. If Lukas were with her, she could ask him questions about such wonders as the fireplace.

Lukas gazed at her, his expression filled with anticipation. What was he waiting for? Should she take his hand? On the other hand, why did he have his elbow pointing toward her? The next moment, he clasped her wrist gently and guided it to the crook of his elbow.

"That's how we escort a lady." He seemed to find her bemused expression amusing. "Come along, sweetheart. Let me give you a tour."

What about the report for your uncle?

He grinned. “Nothing to worry about. I always leave it to the last minute. I find my production soars under pressure.”

You don’t look like somebody who would suffer under pressure.

Lukas laughed. “Believe me, Clio, I do. I just hide it better than others.”

He led her through the corridor, past another hallway, and down a flight of stairs. Clio shuffled along, determined not to lean heavily on his arm or trip on her feet. She hated having to rely on him, especially when he had a smug look, as if she couldn’t go anywhere without him, but she had to be practical. She couldn’t descend those stairs on her own unless she wanted fresh bruises or worse, a twisted ankle.

After a long, agonizing journey down the stairs, they reached the first floor. Lukas guided her through another corridor while servants hurrying past cast them curious glances. Right. More gossip for them to talk about. Just what she needed.

How many servants do you have? she wrote in her notebook.

“At least a hundred. And that isn’t all. Some of them are staying in the Winter Palace back in Areopolis.”

You have two palaces?

“It gets pretty hot during the summer, so Uncle always likes to come here for the cooler temperature and also the healthy sea air. He used to have headaches, but he says he feels better when we vacation here.”

They reached a large door. Lukas stepped forward and pushed it open, revealing a glorious blue sky and lush green gardens.

As Lukas guided her through the gardens, Clio found herself gawking. Poplars and olive trees lined the gravel paths; butterflies and birds fluttered among vibrant morning glories, pale lilacs, and salmon-pink roses; clipped hedges separated different areas; a good number of shaded areas indicated that it could get really hot in the summer. In the center, a magnificent marble statue of a griffin stood, the sheer size suggesting that the mythical creature was revered by the Caladonians.

It’s beautiful, she grudgingly admitted. *Not that the gardens on land are better*, she hastily amended in her head. *Just a different kind of beauty.*

“I thought you might appreciate the fresh air,” Lukas said, “as well as the scenery.”

Clio nodded. She couldn’t help but smile at him. *Thank you. It’s lovely outside.*

After wandering around for a while, Clio felt her newfound legs giving out, so she found a stone bench and sat down, spreading out her skirts to keep them from getting tangled up. At first, she tried to jot down the details for Nerissa, but since there was so much to take in, she decided to draw instead.

It was a disaster. She rarely had any practice at home, and her sketch turned out terrible—a mass of squiggly lines and curves that even she had trouble figuring out what she was drawing.

"What are you doing, writing a novel?" Lukas peered over her shoulder and promptly burst into laughter.

Clio smacked his shoulder with her notebook.

"My, that was artistic." He was still grinning, the mirth sparkling in his crystal-blue eyes. "You could submit it for a drawing competition for seven-year-olds."

Clio was on the verge of turning her back on him when he plucked the pencil out of her hand. "Let me do it for you."

Before Clio could stop him, Lukas sat down and started to draw. She considered stalking off—or rather, waddling off—but her curiosity got the better of her. A moment later, Clio peeked at his work from the corner of her eye.

Wow. His fingers flew over the paper in a deft manner, producing lifelike outlines and intricate details. Within minutes, a beautiful illustration of the garden was completed.

"How's that?"

Reluctantly, Clio wrote, *You draw well.*

"You don't have to look dejected." His smug expression was back again. "Life can be so unfair. Sometimes, you have to accept the fact that some people can be blessed with amazing good looks, a clever mind, and the ability to draw…"

Clio held up her notebook, ready to smack him again, but he caught her wrist. "All right, all right, I apologize. Want to see more? There's a marble gazebo where you can have a great view of the ocean."

He showed her more of the garden and did more sketches at her request. Clio found that once she ignored his bragging, she did enjoy spending time with him. He was so easy to talk to.

Somewhere, a bell chimed.

Clio leaped up, startled, and wobbled on her feet.

“Whoa.” Lukas wrapped an arm around her shoulders and helped her stand. “It’s just the dinner bell. My, time does fly when you’re with such a pretty and charming girl. May I escort you to our dining hall? I guarantee it’s another place that will impress you.”

While Clio was hungry, she shook her head and pointed at her legs. Her thighs and feet were aching. *I’ve had enough walking for the day.*

“Oh well.” Lukas looked disappointed. “In that case, I’ll walk you back to your room.”

On the way, they passed Hermia, who was carrying another pile of clothes. She stopped and stared at the two of them, her eyes wide.

“Where are you going, Your Highness? The dinner bell rang ten minutes ago. Don’t tell me you’re planning to dine in her room.”

Lukas looked as if she had suggested how to achieve immortality. “That is an excellent idea, Hermia. I’ve always wanted an excuse not to have dinner with Uncle. God knows he bores me to death.”

“Absolutely not.” Hermia put her hands on her hips. “If you skip dinner with your uncle, I shall have her removed to the opposite wing of the palace. It’s already highly improper, letting an unmarried young girl live on the same floor with you…”

“Martin also sleeps on our floor, and he’s young and unmarried.”

“Yes, but he’s male.”

A mischievous spark appeared in his eyes. “Are you certain? Look at his delicate features and that dimple when he smiles. How do you know he didn’t shave his head to make himself look like a man?”

Hermia looked utterly appalled. “Don’t be ridiculous! Martin can’t be… He isn’t, is he?”

Lukas threw back his head and laughed. “Relax, Hermia. Do you think Martin could have become the tournament champion last year if he were a girl?”

Hermia looked like she wanted to murder him. “Go. To. Dinner.”

“As soon as I get Clio back to her room. She can’t do without me.”

Clio elbowed him in the ribs.

10

It rained the next couple of days. Some of the palace staff didn't like the gloomy atmosphere of the dark sky and charcoal-gray clouds. The gardeners especially complained how the vegetable garden was ruined by the strong winds and rain, but Clio reveled in the damp weather. While the palace sparkled when the sky was a brilliant blue, her skin broke out in red rashes after trudging around under the sun. Hermia had to bring pots of cream for her skin. After all, she'd grown up in the ocean and missed the moisture.

One morning, Clio put on a pair of comfortable leather shoes and continued her tour of the palace. Since she couldn't go outside due to the rain, she chose to wander through the corridors, admiring the tapestries and paintings, although she refrained from sketching. After seeing those beautifully illustrated drawings made by Lukas, Clio had no intention of presenting her lousy work.

Hermia had suggested she could tour the gallery, where the portraits of the former monarchs hung. Curious to see what the previous kings and queens looked like, Clio made her way to the gallery. It was a long corridor, lined with gilt-framed paintings, each of them so large that the person painted seemed life-size.

Footsteps approached.

"I thought it was you," Lukas said, smiling. "No one but you would be shuffling on the floor. Want to hold on to my arm instead?"

Clio ignored his offer and scribbled in her notebook, *I thought you were busy.*

“I was.” He let out a puff of air and stretched, showing off (in Clio’s opinion) his long, lean body. “Uncle was relentless. I had to draft a ten-page memorandum on our international trade with Anura, meet with a dozen officials, and write a twenty-page essay on the current economic situation of our kingdom and list at least five ways to improve it.”

He has high expectations of you.

“Frankly speaking, I don’t know if I can ever live up to his expectations.” Lukas sighed. “So… admiring the portraits of my family? Are you dazzled by our hereditary good looks?”

Clio didn’t bother to write. She merely pointed at a stern-looking man with a curly mustache and turned to him with a questioning gaze.

“That stodgy-looking old man? He’s my grandfather. He died before I knew him, but everyone said my uncle takes after him.”

Uncle Alik did seem to share that same stern, no-nonsense expression. She had heard her own father tell stories about Lukas’s grandfather. During his reign, conflict had been sizzling between the merpeople and the Caladonians. A group of fishermen had caught a poor mermaid in their net and held her hostage until a huge ransom was paid. In retaliation, the mermaid’s family purchased spells from a sea witch that infused magic in their voices. When the fishermen were at sea, the mermaids sang and hypnotized the fishermen, causing their boat to overturn.

War had nearly broken out between the Caladonians and merpeople, until Lukas’s grandfather and Clio’s grandfather finally managed to negotiate an agreement. Strict rules were made to prevent the two races from harming each other. Today, the tension had disappeared, but still, little interaction existed between the two kingdoms.

“And that’s my mother,” Lukas said after they passed over his father, who looked just like Alik. “Isn’t she lovely? I always wished I had known her, but she died when she gave birth to me.”

Clio glanced at him for a second. He sounded so wistful. Unlike her, he never knew how it was to be feted and cosseted by a mother.

She looked at the portrait of the former queen. She was indeed beautiful, but what stood out most was her whimsical smile, which set her apart from the severe, dour expressions of the male rulers. Perhaps Lukas had inherited his easygoing character from his mother.

You look like her, she wrote.

“I’m glad to hear about that. Not that Father isn’t good-looking, but I’d prefer to take after Mother.”

They spent some more time in the gallery before Lukas suggested they go outside.

“I’m dying for some fresh air. Suppose we go up to the terrace? That way, we won’t be caught in the rain.”

What is a terrace?

“You’ll see.”

Luke led her up two flights of stairs, waiting patiently as she moved with the speed of a snail. After a few twists and turns, he opened a door, announcing they had arrived at the terrace. On one side, a row of stone pillars supported the ceiling above; the other side was a wall hung with baskets of flowers.

To Clio’s surprise, the rain had stopped. A rainbow arched over the land like a miracle. Clio pressed her hands on the stone ledge between two pillars and felt her spirits lift. She had heard of the rainbow and its seven different colors from Nerissa, but she’d never had a chance to see it. From the terrace, which was at least several floors above ground, they could enjoy an excellent view of the gardens below.

The view is gorgeous, she wrote. Her rapt expression didn’t go unnoticed by the prince.

“Would you like to take another tour of the gardens with me? We barely covered half of it last time; you haven’t even seen the stadium,” Lukas said. “The ground is damp, but you can always hold on to me if you slip.”

Despite her determination not to cling on him, Clio did want to visit the gardens again. Unlike Nerissa, who could stay for hours in her room, buried in a book, Clio preferred the outdoors. A pity she couldn’t frolic as she used to with her tail, but being outside was better than being cooped up in the stuffy rooms.

Sure.

He grinned. However, when they went back indoors and down a flight of stairs, a servant came running to them.

“Your Highness!” he panted. “There you are! The regent has been looking for you.”

“What does he want?” Lukas said, appearing annoyed. “I submitted my report to him not even an hour ago. I should think he has had enough of my company for the day.”

“He isn’t summoning you for another meeting. He wants to tell you that Lady Eleni needs your help with her drawings. She was sketching all morning and desires your valuable input.”

“Tell her that my valuable input can wait.” Lukas patted Clio’s wrist. “Can’t you see I am currently occupied?”

Who is Lady Eleni?

The servant looked surprised but answered, “The regent’s foster daughter, miss.”

Uh-oh. No wonder Alik had sent the servant. He must have hopes that Lukas would pay more attention to his foster daughter.

She tugged on Lukas’s sleeve. *You have already given me a tour of the gallery and terrace. I don’t want to hog your attention.*

Lukas frowned. “But you cannot walk properly.”

I can walk slowly. Don’t keep the other lady waiting.

Clio gave him a little shove and shuffled off. She would have liked it better if Lukas accompanied her, but she reasoned that it was better that he spend more time with Eleni. She didn’t need any more rumors spread about her and Lukas, when she wanted to go back to the sea as soon as possible.

SHE WANDERED IN THE GARDENS WITHOUT A DEFINITE DESTINATION IN MIND until the sound of hammering in the distance caught her attention. Following the sound, she came to a huge wall—she would later learn it was the stadium Lukas had mentioned—with red-and-white tents erected along the wall. The hammering sounds were coming from within.

“Miss Clio?”

Clio whirled around to find the prince’s bodyguard, Martin, standing behind her with a puzzled expression. “What are you doing here? I thought your foot wasn’t healed yet.”

Clio wrote in her notebook, *I couldn’t stay in my room any longer. I need fresh air.*

He nodded. “You should have brought your cane. It would be troublesome if you tripped in the mud.”

I’ll be careful. What’s going on in there?

Martin turned his head to look where she was pointing. Raindrops glistened on his shiny bald head. Privately, Clio thought he was good-looking without hair, but he would be even better looking if he let it grow out, wild and wavy, like Lukas.

"That is the stadium," Martin said. "It's where the annual wrestling tournament is held. It will be starting in a few weeks. The carpenters are fixing the stands—some got damaged in the winter."

Clio glanced at his muscular arms and imposing figure. *You're participating, I suppose?*

Martin cracked a grin, and a dimple appeared on the right corner of his mouth. He was supposed to look intimidating, with his bald head and muscular build, but that dimple just threw everything off balance.

"I was the champion last year."

That's why Prince Lukas hired you as his bodyguard?

"Right, but the prince is no weakling himself. I can beat him in archery and jousting and running, but when it comes to swimming…" He shook his head. "You should come and see us swim sometime, Miss Clio. Lukas swims like a fish. I hate to admit it, but he has beaten me in a couple races already."

Clio nodded. If Lukas grew up near the sea, it wasn't surprising he would excel in swimming, but a moment later, a puzzling idea struck her. If Lukas knew how to swim, then how did he end up half drowned on his birthday?

11

Did you know that Lukas knows how to swim?

"Lukas? Well, since he comes over every summer, he'd have no problem swimming. There's no shortage of humans frolicking in the sea."

When the anglerfish on her dresser glowed this morning, Clio had hurried down to the beach as fast as she could manage on her newly acquired feet. Nerissa found a small, sheltered cove where they could hide from prying eyes while Clio filled in as much as she could about the palace and her new life. Nerissa was delighted by the sketches Clio brought and praised the prince's drawing skills, remarking that it was no wonder he was highly popular among Caladonian women.

Then why did he drown that night?

Clio related what Martin had told her. *He couldn't have suddenly gotten cramps in his legs. He wasn't even conscious.*

"Maybe he was drunk," Nerissa offered.

How do humans look when they are drunk?

"Their skin becomes red, they keep babbling nonsense, and if they are really drunk, they can also pass out. And when they wake up, their head hurts. It's called a hangover."

Sounds like a stupid thing to do.

But no matter how stupid it sounded, Clio found it difficult to believe that Lukas would get drunk enough to pass out. It was possible—it was his birthday, and there must have been a lot of people who encouraged him to drink. Still, she felt a bit uneasy about it. She remembered how his eyes

were tightly closed, his face was pale instead of red, and he appeared more ill than drunk, but then she couldn't be sure. She had never seen an inebriated human.

"A human is in fact capable of drinking to death," Nerissa said. "It's lucky that you found him just in the nick of time."

Clio lay on the sand, thinking about that night when she pulled Lukas to shore. A while later, she sat up and reached for her notebook, deciding she'd put Lukas out of her mind for now. *Have you found out a way to restore my tail? Did you forget about it?*

"I found something, but I'm sure you won't want to use it." Nerissa rested her elbows on the sand. "There's a spell listed in an old book, but it requires blood sacrifice."

How?

"You take a dagger and plunge it into the prince's heart. Then you drip his blood on your feet. That will make your tail grow back."

Clio recoiled in horror. *I CAN'T DO THAT!*

"That's why I didn't tell you." Nerissa drew circles on the sand. "You'd bring war between Thalassa and Caladonia."

Clio lay back on the sand with a long sigh. It looked like she couldn't do anything but wait for Mortimer to return.

"Don't look so dejected, sis." Nerissa drew out a waterproof pouch and set it at her feet. "I've brought you some gold I scavenged from a sunken ship. There's a village called Olini near the palace. You can go and buy some pretty things that we haven't seen before."

Clio didn't even raise her head. She couldn't walk without attracting mockery and derision, she'd lost her chance to get Lucanus's attention, and she was far away from home. Buying trinkets was the last thing she wanted to do.

12

"Don't go to the dining room," Hermia warned in a tone that made Clio suspect there was a mad axeman in the room. "His Highness is going to have afternoon tea with Lady Eleni, Phila, and Pasha."

There are other ladies in addition to Eleni?

"Phila and Pasha are daughters of highly respected statesmen," Hermia said severely, as if Clio should have already known. "Alik would have no problem should Lukas choose one of them over Eleni. Anyway, after they attended Lukas's birthday party, Alik asked them to stay at the palace until the tournament starts. We all know he's hoping that the proximity will encourage Lukas to choose one of them as his bride. It's about time, I'd say. Alik has been saying that Lukas should ascend the throne in a few years' time."

Naturally. The future king's duties would include marrying a suitable wife and begetting an heir to further the royal line.

"So let me warn you: don't think he's taken a serious interest in you even if he's been escorting you around. Fortunately, even though Lukas flirts, he hasn't caused real trouble. Alik would kill him if he was found with an illegitimate son. And Alik will never allow a commoner to sit on the throne."

There was a note of resentment in Hermia's tone. Clio thought it was strange, considering how Hermia was so mindful of rules. Maybe the housekeeper couldn't stand the trio but being a servant, never dared to complain.

On a sudden whim, she wrote, *Actually, I'm a princess. My father is the king of Thalassa.*

"Princess of the underwater kingdom?" Hermia raised her eyebrows. "Sure, and I am the empress of Anura. Currently, I'm just masquerading as the housekeeper in order to spy on Caladonia." She gave a rather nasty laugh. "Off with you, now. Roam around as much as you want, but remember, don't go anywhere near the dining room. If Lukas sees you, he'll think it a good joke to invite you as well, and Alik would be mad."

Clio was tempted to visit the dining room and thump around with her walking cane just because Hermia had told her not to do it, but she decided she had better things to do than act like a child. It didn't concern her who the future queen of Caladonia would be.

It was a bright, sunny day, which made her want to go outdoors again. That meant she had to go down the stairs again. Sighing, Clio was shuffling along the corridor when a voice behind her made her stop.

"Hello, Clio." Lukas strode toward her, an amused grin on his face. "Hermia was right. You do resemble a duck when walking about."

Clio gave him a murderous glare, but when she met his eyes, her breath caught in her throat. He was dressed up for the occasion, in a formfitting white jacket and dark trousers. Really, he was too handsome for his own good. Perhaps it was sensible of Uncle Alik to order his nephew to settle down before he broke too many hearts.

"Planning to go down the stairs?" He held out his arms. "Want me to carry you safely to the ground floor?"

Clio immediately shook her head. Either Hermia or Alik would kill her if she were seen in Lukas's arms.

I can get down by myself, thank you, she wrote and shoved her notebook under his nose.

"Are you sure?" Lukas moved closer, the corners of his eyes crinkling in amusement. "Most girls would be thrilled for the opportunity."

I'm not a… Clio crossed off the sentence; she'd nearly given away that she wasn't a human girl. *I need to practice, or I'll never be able to go downstairs on my own.*

"Very well, my lady." Lukas sauntered down the stairs, his swagger making her irritated. At the foot of the stairs, he sat down and took out a pocket watch. "I'll just time you and see how long it's going to take. You could probably beat the record of a snail."

Clio was tempted to throw her notebook at him. *Calm down*, she told herself. *A princess of Thalassa is above petty violence.* Then she started down the stairs, going sideways, as she had to grip the banister firmly with both hands. She knew she looked awkward, and after a while, a bead of sweat slid down her neck, but she *had* to get down by herself.

A chuckle from Lukas made her halt and glance at him. The roguish prince was grinning up at her, clearly enjoying the show.

"You're a delight to watch, sweetheart," he called. "Like a crab getting down the stairs."

Clio vowed that one day she would run down those stairs without the help of the railing, and wipe that smirk off Lukas's face…

Click. Her beaded slipper touched the ground floor. She raised her chin and gave him a defiant look, proud that she had made it safely down the stairs with reasonable speed.

The next second, her knees buckled—whether it was from the effort of making the arduous journey or she had forgotten to concentrate her energy on standing upright, she never knew.

Clio lost her balance. She was all prepared for the familiar pain and the possibility of a new bruise, when Lukas caught her around the waist and the clean scent of his freshly laundered shirt surrounded her.

"There now." His deep voice came from a few inches from the top of her head, sounding amused. "Pride always comes before the fall. Literally."

A horrified gasp echoed through the air. "LUKAS! What are you doing?"

Clio pushed the prince away and leaned against the wall for support. The trio that she'd met on her first day was staring at her, all of them looking scandalized. She wondered which of them was Eleni. Not that it mattered—they all were elaborately dressed and groomed. No one stood out in particular.

Lukas grinned. "Helping a lady down the stairs."

Clio nodded. *He's telling the truth*, she wrote.

All she received were hostile glares. One of the trio looked like she was going to burst into tears. "You don't help a woman down the stairs with your arms around her!"

Clio shuffled away as fast as she could, not wanting to be reprimanded. She only hoped that the unfortunate accident wouldn't make Alik banish her from the palace.

13

Clio waited for the anglerfish figurine to light up again, but it never did. By this time, she was beginning to feel apprehensive. She had been gone for so many days Delia probably had her claws in Lucanus by now. Great sharks, why did his name have to sound so similar to Lukas?

In the back of her mind, a voice whispered that she never had a chance in the beginning, but the competitive side of her rebelled. Even if she had little chance against her sisters, she didn't like giving up without a fight. Lucanus might not have refused her invitation had Delia not asked him first. She had wasted too many years trying to increase her confidence. Clio vowed that she would try her utmost to win Lucanus back when she returned to the ocean.

ONE MORNING, CLIO SET OFF FROM HER ROOM, DETERMINED TO CONQUER the stairs. She could shuffle around without falling over, but she still had difficulty getting down that devastatingly wide and long staircase. She waited until she was certain Lukas had gone for a meeting with his uncle before leaving her room. She didn't want a repeat of that afternoon when she stumbled and landed in his arms right in front of the trio.

One step at a time, she told herself. *Here we go.*

Clio gripped the railing and descended. There were a few servants who hurried by and asked if she needed help, but she waved them off. She couldn't expect to have a servant assist her every time she tried to go down the stairs. She had to succeed on her own.

Halfway through, buoyed by her success, Clio missed the next step and landed at the bottom in a crumpled heap. She threw out her arms to support her body before she had a chance to twist her ankle or bang her knee on the hard marble floor. Thankfully, she thought wryly, her many layers of clothing cushioned her fall.

"No prince to save you today."

Clio looked up. The trio was looking down at her as though she were a crab scuttling on the sand.

"Cut out the act," the same girl said sharply. She had raven tresses that fell over her shoulders in long, loose waves. "Pretending you have an injury is a poor excuse to get Lukas's attention."

I'd be glad to do without his attention, Clio thought. *And I'd do anything to be able to walk properly.*

She didn't want to talk to them, considering how they seemed to regard her as unworthy competition, but she couldn't run, and there were three of them blocking her way.

Clio mentally cursed Mortimer and sighed.

"My name is Pasha," Raven-hair said. "She is Phila"—she pointed at a short girl with chestnut curls—"and that is Eleni."

Uncle Alik's foster daughter. Clio gazed at Eleni, noting that the favored girl was a slender wisp with delicate features and alabaster skin that made her appear doll-like. *Yes, definitely a beauty. Don't understand why Lukas doesn't heed his uncle's wish and marry Eleni.*

"Who are you?" Phila was wearing the same haughty look as Pasha's. "Do you own a noble title?"

"No one with noble blood walks like she does. And she smells like she is covered in sea spray." Pasha drew out a handkerchief and covered her nose.

Phila crossed her arms. "I don't like that complacent expression of yours. You may have succeeded in getting Lukas's attention, but it will never result in marriage. He needs someone from his own station. Not a lowly commoner who can't even walk properly."

So sensitive, Clio thought. Lukas only escorted her to a few places in the palace, and these girls already thought she was a contender for the future queen?

Pasha also crossed her arms. “Kallista tried, and she failed.”

Who’s Kallista?

“A lowborn who tried to seduce the late king. She couldn’t survive in the palace and went back to where she came from. However, we should commend you for your efforts even if they will eventually be for naught. Lukas has never invited a girl to stay in the palace before. What did you do to persuade him?”

Nothing.

“A likely lie,” Pasha sneered. “Anyway, don’t get any ideas, or you’ll come to regret it.”

Something inside her snapped. Clio wrote furiously in her notebook, tore off the page, and flashed it in front of them. *I have no interest in Prince Lukas at all. He has a bloated ego the size of a puffer fish.*

Silence, followed by gasps; then came the rebukes.

“How dare you talk of him like that!” Phila cried.

“That is some nerve of you, comparing the prince to a fish.”

“Apologize this instant.”

Another voice sounded in the hallway. “What’s going on here?” Hermia asked.

“Nothing,” Pasha quickly said. “Just a little chat with the new girl. Good day to you, Hermia.”

And they disappeared down the hallway, their polished shoes clicking on the marble floor.

Clio shook her head. It was then that she realized she was still holding the page and Hermia had read what she’d written.

Hermia gasped.

“Miss Clio! How could you!”

14

Clio didn’t know why Hermia bothered relaying the contents of her note, but the next time Lukas waylaid her in the corridor, he didn’t seem the least annoyed or insulted. In fact, he seemed to regard it as a huge joke.

“A puffer fish?” Lukas looked as if he was going to explode in laughter. “I’ve lived for twenty-one years, and this is the first time someone calls me a puffer fish.”

I don’t see why it’s so funny. Her father used to say the same about Kostas—having the ego of a puffer fish.

“But I’m wounded that you said you’re not interested in me.” Lukas put on a mournful look. “Why not give me a chance while you’re here, sweetheart?”

She rolled her eyes and turned her back to him. His frivolity only confirmed her determination not to fall for his charm. She needed someone serious.

CLIO DID NOT LET THE TRIO AFFECT HER THOUGH SHE WAS GETTING WORRIED about her transformation back into a mermaid. It had been three weeks since she’d arrived at the palace, and Mortimer still hadn’t shown up. Living on land was an eye-opener, but she missed her underwater home. She missed swimming around in the waters, laughing and chasing her pet

dolphin, practicing complicated choreography, or going exploring in the caves and reefs. She missed her family even though she had complained about them most of the time.

One morning, as she gazed out of her window, her eyes fixed on the dark, stormy waves of the ocean, tears came into her eyes. What was her family doing? Did they even miss her? In a family as big as hers, her parents probably wouldn't miss her absence, as long as she was safe.

Stupid fairy godfather, she thought resentfully. *Meddling old fool, messing up others' lives…*

It was as if he could hear her. Just seconds after she called Mortimer every dirty name she could think of, there was a crack, and the fairy godfather appeared, his fins shimmering behind his back. Clio wondered why he still had his fins on. It wasn't as if they were in the ocean.

"Princess." Mortimer looked exhausted, his clothes wrinkled.

What took you so long?

"This is the thanks I get for working so hard on your reverse spell?" He held up a small bottle filled with blue-green liquid. "Any more of your ungratefulness, and I'll drop this."

NO! Clio bolted up and made a grab for the bottle, but her legs gave way, and she stumbled. Mortimer easily held the bottle out of her reach, looking contemptuous. "Looks like you can't even walk like a human."

And whose fault is it? Clio felt like retorting, but since he was holding the precious spell, she tried her best not to glare daggers at him.

"Right." Mortimer set the bottle on the table. "Drink up. After you've regrown your tail, I'll carry you back to the ocean."

Clio tilted her head. *How?*

Mortimer pointed at his giant fins. "Can't you see? I can fly."

They're not fins?

"You thought I was a fish?" Mortimer's eyebrows shot up so high that they disappeared into the top of his forehead. "Don't be ridiculous! These are wings. WINGS—have you even seen a bird? It was another spell that enabled me to survive underwater. Now, drink up. You're wasting enough of my time."

Clio took one last look around her room. However much she thought that Lukas was an obnoxious flirt, she admitted he treated her well. The room was beautiful, the view spectacular, and the food splendid. She was

sorry that she couldn’t visit more places—the village sounded interesting—but she had to return to the sea.

Clio uncorked the stopper and emptied the bottle in one single gulp.

Nothing happened.

She waited. She flexed her toes, hoping for a sign of scales growing back.

Nothing happened.

She grabbed her notebook and scribbled. *How long does the spell take? Last time, it was much quicker.*

Mortimer was frowning. His eyes were glued to her feet, which were planted firmly on the ground. Not even one toe had disappeared. “Did you fall in love with the human prince?”

Clio almost keeled over. *NO! And what does that have to do with the transformation?*

“Haven’t you heard of the story of your ancestor? She fell in love with a human man scores of years ago. She wanted to transform so she could marry him. However, she couldn’t stay permanently as a human unless he fell in love with her. She relied on his attachment to keep her legs.”

Clio paused. Hadn’t Nerissa mentioned one of their ancestors had fallen in love with a human? The man must have loved her back, but she had no idea it was a requirement to stay human.

“Therefore, there must be a bond between you and the prince that is tethering you to land. Did he kiss you?”

Clio shook her head. A memory dawned on her, and her mouth fell open in horror.

“What?” Mortimer asked, looking irritated. “Can’t even remember this detail? Are you even a normal young girl?”

I kissed him, but I was trying to save him from drowning. Clio described that night when she saved Lukas from the ship. *But how could that be possible? It happened even before you created the spell!*

“Well.” Mortimer crossed his arms. “When I concocted the potion, I had Lukas specifically in mind. I uttered his full name and title. The spell recognized the history between you two, and the kiss made the transformation much stronger than I anticipated. My reverse spell didn’t contain enough magic to counter it.”

Clio felt like throwing the seashell on her mantelpiece at him. *I can’t believe you’re so incompetent!*

He rolled his eyes. “There’s no need to act like it’s the end of the world. Look at this room; look at your clothes. You’re living like a princess in this place.”

I AM a princess, you brainless jellyfish.

He bristled. “That’s the first time I’ve been called a jellyfish.”

Turn me back, or I’ll tell my parents to… Clio paused. What was the best way to threaten a fairy godfather?

“No need to glower like that. It’s only a matter of time before I turn you back.” Mortimer crossed his arms. “Just be glad you’re not a human—my spells stick better on them. But since you’re a mermaid, I’m confident a reversal can be achieved.” He shifted a little uncomfortably. “Eventually.”

She glared at him, and he held up his hands. “Look, since you’re in such a hurry, I’ll get a sea witch who could turn you back. She’s more familiar with underwater folk than I am. However… she and I had a quarrel a while back. It could take some time to convince her.”

Why am I not surprised that you’re incapable of having a good relationship with others?

Mortimer drew himself up to his full height. “I don’t like your tone, girl. Do you know what it takes to be a great inventor?”

Casting a spell and failing to revert it?

Mortimer looked offended. Without another word, he vanished.

Hey!

15

Clio couldn’t believe that Mortimer had failed her again, and all because of that stupid kiss. Magic must have a grudge against her. She had waited so long for that reverse spell, and it wasn’t strong enough? How much longer did she have to stay at the palace? She couldn’t use that excuse of her sister being out at sea forever.

She was still rolling around her bed, as if imitating her mermaid moves could help her get back to her old self, when there came a rap on the door.

“Clio?”

Lukas’s voice.

Clio scrambled up. Her hair was a mess, and her clothes were wrinkled, but then she had no incentive to dress up and look pretty for him. She wasn’t among the candidates that Alik had in mind, and she had no intention of becoming one. Hastily running a hand through her hair, she smoothed her skirts and opened the door.

Lukas stood there, slightly surprised. His gaze lingered on her hair, which hung loose down her front, reaching past her waist. For a moment, something like appreciation passed through his eyes, but he quickly focused on her face again.

“I thought that you’d be out since the sky’s so blue.” Suddenly, he frowned and moved a little closer. Clio backed away, realizing that he must have noticed her eyes were red from crying. “Are you all right? Did anything happen?”

She didn’t want to talk to him about Mortimer. Finally she scribbled, *It’s nothing to worry about. Why aren’t you meeting your uncle today?*

The frown remained, but he said, “It’s my day off.”

Your uncle actually lets you have a break?

This time, a small smile graced his lips. “Only because I promised him a week’s worth of reports. So”—he rested a hand on the doorframe—“want to come to Olini with me? You’d like the village, I’m sure. There are also a few people I’d like you to meet. And…” He hesitated. “It might help you feel better. On whatever you were worried about.”

He waited as if he was hoping she would tell him what had caused her grief, but Clio didn’t reach for her pencil.

“Please? They have been preparing to welcome visitors who are arriving for the tournament, and there will be plenty of stuff in the market. You can buy something for your sister.”

Well, it wasn’t as if she had much to do. Nerissa had once showed her a picture of Olini—a picturesque little village tucked away in the mountains along the coast.

Clio nodded, drawing a huge grin from him.

“Come on; Martin always gets grumpy if he’s kept waiting.”

IT WASN’T UNTIL THEY ARRIVED AT OLINI THAT CLIO WONDERED IF THIS was a good idea. The village was built on a hilly area; the narrow streets wound and dipped and rose on gentle slopes, which made it necessary for her to hold onto Lukas’s arm.

What about the ladies staying at the palace? She scribbled in her notebook. *Aren’t they coming as well?*

Lukas grimaced. “They still think I’m in a deep consultation with the Assembly—the legislative court for our kingdom. Honestly, they’ve come to the village so many times they won’t enjoy it as much as you will.” He winked. “Moreover, I’d rather spend time with you.”

Your uncle wants you to settle down.

He yawned. “Sure, but I’m the one who’s supposed to get married, not him.”

She didn’t know what to reply to that, so instead she focused on admiring the village. Olini was lovely from a distance and was even prettier when explored on foot. Her boots clicked on the cobblestone street, which

was flanked by houses draped in lavender and roses. The houses were painted blue and white, and golden letters were emblazoned on the swinging signs. Vendors in the streets were selling olive bread, grilled octopus on sticks, and cups of mint tea steeped from the mountain spring.

“Looks like we have a good crowd. It’s the third year we’ve held this tournament, and we’re getting more and more successful each year.” Lukas nodded at an assortment of soaps. “Maybe you’d like to get a bar of soap for your sister. Olini is famous for them, and the sellers wrap them up nicely if you say it’s a gift.”

Clio picked up a slab of soap, which smelled like a rose and had the shape of a rose engraved over the smooth surface. She was sure that not only Nerissa would appreciate the soap, but her sisters would as well. The people on land could truly make some remarkable things.

After she purchased a basketful of scented soaps, the sound of music arrested her attention.

Lukas caught her eye and smiled. “Want to go and see the villagers dance?”

Clio nodded eagerly. Without thinking, she slipped her hand under his arm and let him guide her toward the source of the music.

They came to a large open space with villagers gathered around, clapping to the music. Several dancers, including women arrayed in bright dresses and men in loose white shirts, were whirling around like the wind. A few musicians were performing with violins and drums.

Clio was enthralled. Her gaze riveted on the dancers, she took a step, trying to emulate the way they twirled, and she stumbled.

“Whoa.” Lukas grabbed her arm. “Take it easy, Clio. You’ve barely learned how to walk properly.”

Frustrated, Clio regained her balance and stared at the dancers. If only she were in water, she could easily beat them.

The song came to an end. The dancers bowed and curtsied to tumultuous applause. One dancer took off his hat and held it out to the audience. A few of them dropped coins into the hat.

Puzzled, Clio pulled out her notebook, wanting to ask Lukas what the dancer was doing, when someone interrupted.

“Lukas!” A young man with dark curly hair tapped on the prince’s shoulder. His overalls, sunburnt skin, and callused hands indicated he was a laborer—someone who wasn’t normally expected to greet the prince in such

an informal manner. “It’s been a long time since you came down to see us! By the way, who is this? Our future queen?”

Clio quickly shook her head, but Lukas merely grinned. “Clio, let me introduce you to the village rascal, Felix. Felix, meet the palace’s new guest, Miss Clio.”

Felix held out his hand. “Pleased to meet you, miss.”

It’s Clio, she wrote.

“She’s mute,” Lukas quickly added. “We have to communicate with wild gestures or the written word.”

Clio wrote, *A pleasure to meet you.*

Felix glanced at her and muttered to Lukas, “Say, if you don’t mind, can I court her? You have loads of girls to choose from.”

“Sure, if you want to get beaten up.”

“You can’t hit me, your uncle will skewer you.”

“Who said I have to do the dirty work when I’ve got a bodyguard like Martin?”

Felix rolled his eyes; Lukas wagged his finger as if saying, *don’t even think about it.*

“Come along,” Felix finally said. “Mother’ll be glad to see you.”

He led them to a pretty cottage up the street. The door was painted blue like the sky, and a wind chime made of seashells hung over the door. When Felix pushed it open, there was a tinkling sound that made Clio look up—another souvenir that she could purchase for Nerissa.

“Mom!” Felix hollered. “Look who’s here!”

A pretty woman bustled into the living room. While she was no young girl, she had definitely aged well. Moreover, she walked with such grace and rhythm that Clio was sure that if this woman were a mermaid, she could turn swimming into an art form.

“Lukas!” she exclaimed, a huge grin spreading across her face. “Just the other day, I was telling Felix it’s been so long since you’ve been down here. Has Alik been keeping you busy?”

“Yeah, Uncle’s being his usual ruthless self.” Lukas hugged the woman, pulled away, and whistled. “Roxane, you look younger than ever. Next time, people will go from calling you my elder sister to my younger sister.”

She snorted but looked pleased nevertheless. “Don’t be ridiculous, young man. I can see that Alik’s discipline hasn’t curbed your tendency to

spout nonsense.” She glanced at Clio, who was standing awkwardly near the door. “And who is this young lady?”

Introductions were quickly performed. Clio wasn’t sure how much she could reveal even though she instinctively trusted Roxane, but Lukas merely mentioned Clio was a guest at the palace.

“On your uncle’s invitation?”

“On my invitation.”

Roxane lifted a delicately plucked eyebrow, but soon she smiled and said, “In that case, I must treat your special guest to almond pie. Felix! Stop lurking in that corner, and come help me set the table.”

Felix trudged into the kitchen, grousing that she treated him more like a slave than son.

Lukas turned to Clio. “Roxane has been like family to me. Since I lost my parents, Uncle tried his best to fill in their shoes, but sometimes I needed motherly affection, and the servants at the palace were too respectful to fulfill that role. When I was a young boy, I always looked forward to spending summers here, so I could sneak down to the village. Roxane looked after me just the same as she did Felix; once, when we got into a stupid fight, she didn’t hesitate to spank both of us.”

A delicious aroma wafted through the air. Clio sniffed eagerly; she hadn’t eaten much that morning, due to her anger at Mortimer.

Roxane emerged from the kitchen, carrying a large golden-brown pie sprinkled with sugar. She put the pie on the table and cut it into generous slabs while Felix laid out plates and forks. Lukas brought over a pitcher of ice-cold water that was sitting on a side table—it was obvious he had been here many times and knew where things were kept.

Clio hovered near the table, wondering what she could do to help, but Roxane laid a hand on her shoulder and made her sit down.

“All you have to do is eat.” She slid a plateful of pie in front of Clio. “Tuck in.”

Clio was only too happy to obey. After the first bite, a blissful smile blossomed on her face. The rich, buttery taste, mixed with the scent of almonds, practically melted in her mouth. The sugar also smelled fragrant, complementing the pie beautifully.

“Mother puts the sugar with rose petals in glass jars and lets them sit for several weeks,” Felix explained.

Clio gave a two-thumbs-up. She had learned the gesture when observing the servants.

As the conversation drifted to a discussion about Martin's chances of winning the tournament again, Clio looked around the room. Even if she could talk, she didn't know anything about the tournament to join their discussion. She didn't feel left out, though. She was too busy admiring Roxane's house, which was furnished in a quaint, whimsical style that differed from the palace's opulence, but was appealing all the same.

A portrait of Roxane caught her eye. She looked a decade younger, posed in a rather difficult position. She had one foot lifted in the air, close to her head, and her arms were spread out like a seagull's wings. Her other foot was pencil straight, and she was using only her big toe to sustain the weight of her body.

"That's a sketch I made when I was a child," Lukas said, noticing her gaze. "Roxane was once the best dancer in our kingdom. I drew this a few years before she retired."

Did you teach the dancers in the village?

"Oh yes. Some of them joined my troupe years ago," Roxane said. "We used to perform around the kingdom, sometimes even internationally. But it's difficult to maintain a dancing troupe, so these days we only perform around Olini and the Summer Palace. Too many would-be dancers prefer the security and stability of other jobs. Over the years, I've had more than two dozen drop out and move to the capital." She looked down at the table and sighed. "Lukas has tried to help us, but he can't squander all the funding in the royal treasury."

"It was a pity when you broke your leg and the troupe lost its star performer," Lukas said.

"Oh, the troupe would have gone downhill without my injury anyway," Roxane said, waving a hand. "But we'll survive. Last time we performed, on Lukas's birthday, quite a few nobles were liberal with their coin."

Clio remembered the dancers on the deck. So they had come from Roxane's troupe.

"By the way… pardon me if I'm impertinent, but I just saw how you walked when you came in the house." Roxane looked at Clio. "Have you tried shifting your concentration to your abdomen instead of your thighs? You are placing too much weight on your feet."

Clio was a bit embarrassed, but if this was a chance to stop shuffling around like a duck… She stood up. Lukas also stood, as if anticipating she'd trip and fall into his arms. She sent him a withering glare and started to walk.

"Straighten your spine," Roxane said, watching her wobble slowly toward a rocking chair. "Relax your shoulders—you're holding them too stiffly. Imagine there's a string on top of your head that's pulling you vertically upwards… There! That's so much better."

Maybe it was because Roxane gave excellent instructions. Maybe Clio had more natural talent when it came to controlling her body. Or maybe it was a bit of both. By the time Martin came in and announced it was time to return to the palace, Clio could walk—even glide—across the room without any assistance. She took Roxane's hand with both of hers, her eyes filled with gratitude.

"Amazing," Lukas said, clapping his hands. "Who knows? We'll have you dancing next time."

MARTIN DROVE THEM BACK TO THE PALACE. HE LOOKED EVEN MORE intimidating than when she'd met him at the stadium. While they were strolling through Olini, Clio noticed there was a new tattoo on his arm. It was a shark with its jaws stretched wide open, as if ready to attack and devour its prey.

Why doesn't Martin have any hair? He doesn't look old enough to be bald.

Lukas laughed. "He has this queer notion that having hair makes him look girlish."

Why does that worry him? He's already a champion fighter.

"He was born in a family with six sisters." Lukas leaned back in the seat in a languorous manner. "Don't go around telling the palace staff—but his elder sisters used to pet him and dress him in skirts when he was a toddler."

Clio snorted.

"He has a twin sister, Elisette, which made things worse. People used to confuse him with Elisette when they were young, which irritated him to no end. So he tried to look as different as possible, such as shaving his head

and getting those tattoos. He also trained vigorously in all kinds of sports, which enabled him to become an excellent athlete and fighter. When he learned we had an annual tournament, Martin ran away from home, won the competition, and Uncle offered him a well-paid position as my personal bodyguard."

Good for him. He no longer has to suffer the embarrassment of being mistaken for a girl.

"True." Lukas grinned. "He once mentioned he resented a fairy godfather who bestowed him with feminine beauty. Too bad I'm already perfection personified, or I could have asked him to gift me something extraordinary."

Clio sat up. *What's the name of the fairy godfather?*

"Maurice…no, he's Uncle's servant…Morfin? Morris? Ah, now I remember. It's Mortimer."

16

While she enjoyed visiting Olini and meeting Roxane, Clio kept thinking about Martin's unfortunate encounter with Mortimer. So Martin was also a victim of Mortimer's magic (unsurprisingly) though she thought her gift was much worse. Martin, at least, had turned his misfortune into an advantage—winning a tournament and becoming the prince's personal bodyguard.

A servant told her that Martin usually spent his mornings training in the gymnasium unless Lukas required him to accompany him to somewhere like Olini.

Clio set off according to the servant's directions. As she went down the stairs and opened the doors leading to the gardens, she noted with glee that she no longer walked like a duck. She'd have to ask Nerissa to bring a gift—something like a coral bracelet or shell-encrusted hand mirror—for Roxane.

The gymnasium turned out to be a huge building near the stadium. The door was wide open, so Clio sailed in and promptly froze at the sight in front of her.

Men—bare-chested, muscle-bulging men—were practicing in the gymnasium. Some were fighting unarmed, throwing punches and aiming flying kicks, while others battled with swords and spears. The noise of metal clashing mixed with their grunts and panting, making their fights sound both frightening and dangerous. There was an unpleasant odor of sweat, worsened by the limited number of windows, but Clio's need to talk to Martin was too strong. Besides, she admitted with secret candor, the sight

of the men fighting with their athletic, well-honed bodies was a spectacle most women would find attractive.

Pressing a handkerchief over her nose, Clio made her way along the walls, careful to avoid getting too close to the action. When she passed a heavyset man who had stopped for a drink of water, he whistled and called at her.

“Hello, darling. You here to find your lover?”

The man actually looked a little like Lukas, with his dark hair and blue eyes, but his physique was stockier. And whereas the prince’s winks and smirks only made her roll her eyes, this man’s leering expression made her distinctly uncomfortable, as if he was a tiger shark that had discovered a lone prey.

“Or you’ve come to watch us fight? I could show you more than…”

“Damen!” another man yelled. “Get your ass over here. We ain’t done with this round yet!”

Clio slipped away to the far end of the stadium, glad to get away from the tiger-shark man. Damen reminded her of an old acquaintance of her father’s, who always liked to hover too close for comfort whenever they talked and found chances to brush his tail against her scales.

Where was Martin, anyway?

Finally, she spotted him in a corner, wiping his face with a large towel, along with Lukas. Probably, the two of them had just finished sparring together. Clio made a beeline for them, not wanting to come across another Damen.

“A letter from my family yesterday,” Martin was saying. “Anneliese has run away. Again. Only she seems to have actually made it out of the city this time.”

Lukas didn’t seem alarmed. In fact, he appeared amused. “First Sophie, then you, now Anneliese. Running away seems to run in your family.”

Martin looked away and mumbled something about oppression and woodcutters.

Lukas stretched and yawned. “Well, I need to be heading back, or Uncle will have my hide. He doesn’t approve of my spending too long… Hello, darling.”

He grinned and stepped closer. “Fancy seeing you down here. Did you come to see me? What a pity; you missed an impressive performance. Do you feel up to another round, Martin? I need a chance to show off my skills.

Wait, not you. Probably should pick someone other than the reigning champion…”

I didn’t come to see you, Clio wrote. He needed to know that the world didn’t revolve around him. Not her world, anyway. *It’s Martin I need to talk to.*

Martin promptly choked on the leather hip flask he was drinking from. “Me?”

Clio nodded. *Just a few questions. It won’t take too much time.*

Lukas glanced at her; he seemed to guess what was going on in her mind. “In that case, I’ll give you the privacy you need. See you tomorrow, old chap.” He clapped Martin on the shoulder, whispered something in his ear, and sauntered off.

Martin looked befuddled as he followed Clio out of the gymnasium toward a clump of trees, where she felt certain they wouldn’t be overheard.

“Is there something the matter with Lukas?”

No, not the prince, Clio wrote. *I’ve heard that you know a fairy called Mortimer.*

Martin’s eyes grew wide when he read her notebook. “Are you also a victim of his idiotic gifts?”

Clio felt like giving him a fist bump.

“Let me guess… You lost your voice because of him?”

It wasn’t just her voice she’d lost, but she didn’t bother to tell him about her tail.

Yes. He tried to take the curse off me, but he failed. Now he’s off to find a witch who can help me, but he isn’t sure whether he will succeed. Is there some other way to get my voice back?

“That idiotic old fool.”

I couldn’t agree more.

“Keeps going around and giving people what they don’t need.”

Yeah, can’t we tie him up and drop him into the sea?

“I can see why you’re so devastated,” Martin said, with a look of mutual sympathy. “Why did he choose to take away your voice? He gave me and my siblings unwanted gifts, but this sounds more severe, like a real punishment. Did you annoy your parents with incessant chatter when you were a child?”

Clio glared and shook her head quickly. *I lost my ability to speak just a month ago. It was a stupid misunderstanding. And even if I were a*

chatterbox, it's cruel to take away my voice.

"So it wasn't bestowed at birth. That means it should be easier to break." Martin rubbed his chin. "I could try writing my parents and see if they could contact someone in the Fairy Council."

What is the Fairy Council? Mortimer had mentioned it a few times, but she was too occupied with other matters to question him about it.

"They're the governing body over all fairies. They're the ones who make him give gifts and fulfill wish quotas in the first place. But at least they put pressure on him to make up for his mistakes when his gifts are unwanted or backfire. And they seem to keep something of an eye on him though they can't prevent him from making mistakes all the time. Maybe one of the fairies could succeed where he failed."

He shrugged. "But no promises. I'm not sure my parents know how to reach them. We certainly haven't managed to get rid of Mortimer ourselves —which we would all be more than happy to do."

Clio's heart sank, but she wrote, *I'm sure I'll have more faith in them than in Mortimer.*

"Pity it's too late for me now," Martin said with a doleful sigh. "It's impossible to take off a gift that was given to you at birth."

At least you can talk. And you even won the tournament last year. Most other men would be envious.

"I could have won without this." Martin made a wry smile, and his dimple appeared. "Bane of my existence."

Clio tried hard not to smile.

17

"These would make wonderful gifts," Nerissa cooed, examining a bar of soap scented with mint and lemon. The seller had wrapped them in pale-pink tissue and packed them in a basket, nestled among sprigs of lavender and starflowers. "This is so much better than waiting for careless humans to drop something in the ocean."

They were sitting in the small sheltered cove. It was close enough that Clio didn't have to walk too far, yet the rocky ledge that hugged the cove was tall enough that they were blocked from view from the palace. Clio sat on a jutted rock, dangling her feet in the water, skirts hitched up and tied to her thighs, while Nerissa floated in the water, making her envious.

"How's life in the palace now?"

It went from terrible to tolerable.

She had been walking much better since Roxane had told her how to focus her energy. No longer did she put pressure on her feet but drew strength from her abdomen. In fact, Clio heard Phila remark to Pasha that the "mute duck" was walking normally.

"I knew that you wouldn't have much trouble. You look healthy and well-fed, and your outfits are so elegant." Nerissa beamed. "By the way, I've got some great news. Iolanthe got engaged to Thanos. The Pelagosian royal family arrived yesterday to witness the ceremony."

Happiness swelled in her heart for her sister—Iolanthe had been infatuated with Thanos since she'd first set eyes on him. She was glad her

sister’s dream had come true, but the engagement also reminded her of her own failure.

Has Lucanus come as well?

Nerissa flopped back on the sand. “Yeah. Unfortunately, Delia has been making sheep eyes at him.”

Clio felt her stomach churn. If she didn’t do something soon, Delia would certainly get her claws into him, but short of making Mortimer give Lucanus legs, she couldn’t see how she could keep Delia away from him.

“But he did seem interested when he learned that you are now on land,” Nerissa hastily added. “And so does his sister. Remember Thisbe? She has a huge crush on your Prince Lukas.”

Clio rolled her eyes. *He’s not my prince. He’s just a dumb mistake that dumb fairy godfather made.*

“Anyway, Thisbe is really excited that you get to live in the palace with Lukas. She’s asking if you could get her something from Lukas.”

Clio almost fell off the rock. *What does she want?*

“Just anything that Lukas owns. Like a lock of his hair or a monogrammed handkerchief. Something that isn’t costly but belongs to him.”

Clio’s eye twitched. Thisbe was only a child, but she sure was creepy when it came to her obsession.

Seeing her hesitant expression, Nerissa quickly said, “Clio, you don’t have to do it. If you ask Lukas for his handkerchief, he’ll probably think you fancy him.”

He probably already thinks I fancy him, Clio thought. But she didn’t have the nerve to write in her notebook and show him, *I don’t have a crush on you. Get over it.* He might laugh and tell her she was dreaming and shouldn’t take his flirting seriously.

Besides, Lukas already knew she wasn’t interested in him, given how he’d laughed his head off when she described him as a puffer fish, which didn’t seem to affect him in the least. He still flirted with her whenever he had the chance.

Clio didn’t want to do it. However, she knew that Lucanus had a deep affection for his little sister. If she helped Thisbe, Lucanus might regard her more warmly. It was the only thing she could do to attract him while she was stuck on land.

It’s all right. I’ll try.

Just when she showed Nerissa her answer, she heard voices floating from somewhere near the cove—shrill, annoying voices that belonged to none other than the trio. Quickly she scribbled on her notebook, *You'd better go. Don't let those humans see you.*

Nerissa was reluctant to go, but Clio kept making shooing motions. Finally, her sister dived into the water and swam away.

"This basket is so heavy!"

"There's so much sand! It's getting in my shoes!"

"Where are Lukas and Martin? Are you sure they came swimming today?"

Phila, Pasha, and Eleni arrived on the beach, looking for the prince and his bodyguard. Clio crept away as stealthily as she could, not wanting to be discovered. She knew another route back to the palace. As she walked, she wondered why the trio complained so much. *What's the big deal with getting sand in your shoes? Just take them off!*

When she clambered to the other side of the cove, she heard the sound of water splashing, and someone exclaimed.

"Hello, sweetheart."

The next second, Lukas rose from the water and stepped onto shore, Martin following him. Giant sharks, the prince looked good today. His torso was muscular and golden skinned, droplets of water dripped down his back, and his hair clung to his neck. She couldn't relate this tall, splendid young man to that dumb person who nearly drowned. He looked surprised, yet delighted, to see her. His gaze lingered on her legs for a moment before returning to her face. When Clio had dangled her legs in the water, she had tied the ends of her skirt around her thighs after Hermia grumbled that she was always getting her clothes wet.

"What are you doing here?" Lukas asked, his smile brighter than the sun shining over the cove. "Contemplating the meaning of life? I didn't know you were so philosophical, sweetheart."

Clio rolled her eyes. As she couldn't tell him about Nerissa, she merely wrote, *It was too dry in the palace.*

She wasn't lying. While the palace lacked nothing in comfort, it felt too stuffy. Sometimes when she strolled in the gardens, the sun strong enough to bake her face, she felt that her skin was going to wither up.

"I smell food," Martin said, looking around and sniffing the air.

Lukas grinned. “When it comes to food, he can be more remarkable than a hound.”

What’s a hound?

Lukas took her pencil and drew a peculiar-looking animal. It had ears that stood up from the head and a feathery tail. “They have an excellent sense of smell,” he explained. “Uncle used to take a pack of hounds when he hunted in the forest.”

“Can we save the lesson for later?” Martin interrupted. “We spent all morning swimming.”

Lukas laughed. “Very well, then. Never invoke Martin’s wrath when he’s hungry, especially when he’s our champion fighter.” He offered Clio his arm. “Let’s go and replenish our energies. Eleni had mentioned about bringing food for us, and looks like she came just in time.”

Clio didn’t fancy getting skewered by the trio’s death glares, but he took her hand and held it firmly. Her mind told her to withdraw her hand, but he was in such a good mood that she hesitated. It almost seemed criminal to wipe that sunny smile off his face.

“Don’t want you tripping over the rocks,” he said, though from the tone of amusement, he sounded as though he wouldn’t mind if she tripped.

With a sigh, she followed him and Martin. They passed the cove and climbed over the ledge, and it wasn’t long before they spotted the trio looking around, each of them clutching a large covered basket.

“Your Highness!” Phila called.

“We’ve brought refreshments,” Pasha added, hurrying forward. “The regent said you need plenty of sustenance after your swim.”

“Why is she also here?” Eleni asked. Her gaze immediately fell on Lukas, who was still holding Clio’s hand. Clio shook his hand off and wrote in her notebook, *I was having a stroll on the other side. I just met them.*

Phila and Pasha also looked displeased, but they sensed it was pointless pursuing the matter and it was better to inundate Lukas with food.

It was excellent food too, which tasted even better after long hours in the cove. There were oat cakes slathered in almond butter, sliced bananas on yogurt, baked sweet potatoes, and fresh, cool water enhanced with mint leaves.

Martin looked as if he were in heaven. Clio supposed that he needed a lot of food for his training. Kostas was the best swimmer in her family, and his appetite could rival a whale’s.

Suddenly, Pasha yelled and edged closer to Lukas, clutching his arm. “Ahh! There’s something on the beach!”

Her forefinger shook as she pointed, as if she’d been stung by a poisonous jellyfish.

Clio hastened to check the dangerous creature that had appeared. If it was a jellyfish, then the wound had to be treated immediately. To her great relief, it was merely a sand beetle. It was gray, shaped like an egg, with feathery antennae.

Clio smirked, picked up the beetle, and held it out. With her other hand, she quickly wrote, *It won’t hurt you. It’s quite harmless.*

But the girls squealed and backed away. Clio was puzzled, her hand outstretched, the beetle resting peacefully on her palm. Why were the girls so afraid of it? She used to have fun teasing Kostas with sand beetles when they were children.

“You seem to be quite at ease with these crawly critters, Miss Clio,” Martin said.

“Indeed.” Lukas looked like he was trying not to laugh.

I grew up in… near the sea, after all. Look, I can demonstrate to you, they’re quite fun.

Clio asked Martin to hand her his hip flask and poured a few drops of water on the beetle. It wiggled and flailed, making a queer digging movement, which only made the girls squeal louder.

“Thanks for the lesson, Clio,” Lukas said, amused. “We should hire you to teach us about the marine life sometime.”

Clio shrugged. She honestly didn’t see the point in being so scared of a tiny sand beetle. A jellyfish or crab, she could understand, but these creatures were harmless.

Once the food disappeared, most of it ending up in Martin’s stomach, they made their way back to the palace. Clio made a point to avoid Lukas though she took comfort in the knowledge that if the trio tried to threaten her again, she knew what weapon to employ.

18

Clio had a new problem.

How was she to get something from Lukas for Thisbe? Snip off a lock of his hair? She eyed a dog frisking in the garden; it was a similar shade to Lukas's dark hair. Would Thisbe be able to tell the difference if she pulled out one of the dog's hairs?

She'd just have to sneak into Lukas's room when he wasn't there, but that posed a risk as well. Servants frequently entered his room for cleaning, and Alik also occasionally knocked when he wanted to drag Lukas away for a meeting that could cure insomnia.

The tournament. It was only a few days away, and Hermia said everyone would be at the stadium. She'd find a chance to sneak away, race to Lukas' room, and steal a handkerchief or something small enough that he wouldn't miss it.

Is this really necessary?

Clio held out her notebook as Hermia snapped a sparkling silver chain with tiny silver bells dangling from it onto her ankle. When she moved her foot, the bells jingled.

"Anklets are the fashion nowadays," Hermia said, bringing out a second one and indicating that Clio stick out her other foot. "His Highness wants you to dress like the other ladies, and all the ladies will be dressed in the

latest fashion at the tournament. Not just the men will be the center of attention; the ladies will use this chance to show off."

I sound like the sheep in the pasture, Clio wrote. After she was able to walk like a human, she had gone further exploring the palace grounds and discovered a flock of sheep with bells hanging around their necks.

"His Highness spent a good deal of money on these," Hermia said, barely glancing at her notebook. "I won't have fine jewelry go to waste."

Clio moved her foot, causing the bells to jingle. They were pretty but inconvenient for what she had in mind. How was she to sneak away from the tournament without making noise?

Lukas knocked on the door. He was dressed immaculately in a white shirt, brown tunic, and dark-green trousers. His normally messy hair was combed neatly, not a hair out of place—handsome as usual but lacking his usual carefree manner.

His face lit up when he saw her. "Every time I think you couldn't get prettier, you surprise me. Excellent job, Hermia. I should ask Uncle to offer you a pay raise."

She wouldn't blush. She wouldn't blush in his presence. In an attempt to banish her discomfort, Clio scribbled, *That hair doesn't suit you.*

Lukas raised his eyebrows. "Do you like me better with messy hair?"

Giant sharks, he really was a flirt. *I meant that the caveman look suits you better. It is wild and uncultured.*

Lukas threw back his head and laughed. "In that case, I'd better muss it up…"

"No!" Hermia looked as if he had announced he wanted to run around the stadium naked. "It is an international event! You simply can't look slovenly."

"I'm just joking." Lukas shrugged. "Anyway, it is best that we go down to the tournament now." He offered an arm to Clio. "May I escort you to the stadium, my lady?"

Clio didn't even have time to whip out her notebook as Lukas led her away, a hand pressed lightly on her back.

They went down the stairs, Clio feeling proud that she didn't need to hold the railing. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, Lukas chuckled.

What's so funny?

"Your expression was so smug, as if you won the tournament yourself, but all you did was get down the stairs."

Clio glared. *Human babies need a year to walk. I should be considered a genius for learning so fast.*

He still looked amused. “Are you comparing yourself to an infant?” He pointed at his back. “Shall I carry you onto the grounds, strapped in a sling?”

Clio tried to punch him, but he dodged, laughing.

Behind them, Hermia scowled. “Both of you are behaving like infants.”

She was right. Clio stiffened and held her head high, vowing that she didn’t need someone like Lukas, who made her lose composure. She needed a calming influence like Lucanus. Then she wondered why she was comparing Lucanus to this immature human.

They didn’t speak (Clio couldn’t; Lukas and Hermia didn’t) until colorful flags came into sight. Throngs of people were milling around but made way when they saw the prince. Roxane and Felix were near one of the large tents erected outside the stadium—Clio guessed the tents were arranged for the participants to rest and prepare before they were called. They waved and smiled before getting swept up in the crowds pushing their way into the stadium.

When Clio entered the stadium, she drew in a deep breath. There were hundreds of people squeezed together in the stands, talking at the tops of their voices in order to be heard. Although the tournament was yet to start, the noise was already deafening. A few people were waving banners in support of their favorite participants. A boy about fourteen or fifteen was brandishing a huge red banner that read Martin for the Champion.

Lukas led her to the center of the stands, where an area was clearly designated for the royals. It was much less crowded, the view was great, and the seats were draped with purple cloth. When he came to an empty seat with a golden cushion, Lukas frowned and tapped the shoulder of a noble sitting nearby.

“Where’s Uncle?”

“The regent had a stomachache and asked to be excused. He expects you to open the tournament on his behalf.”

“He rarely has a stomachache.” Lukas frowned. “We dined together, but I am feeling fine.”

Maybe it was Alik’s age getting to him, Clio thought. On the other hand, he didn’t look that old, or maybe he’d simply consumed too much food.

Lukas’s eyes gleamed. “In that case, since his seat is vacant, Clio can take…”

“No.” Hermia grabbed Clio’s arm. Clio felt like a puppet held between them. “She can’t sit with you unless you are engaged.”

Alarmed, Clio jerked away. A flash of hurt appeared in Lukas’s eyes, but it quickly disappeared.

Adamant that Clio couldn’t sit with the prince, Hermia conducted her to the long end of the stadium. Clio found herself sandwiched among the trio, who were surprisingly tolerant when they saw her. Phila even gave her an absentminded nod. Following their gazes, she understood why they were too occupied to glare daggers at her.

Their seats, while far away from Lukas, also afforded an excellent close-up view of the participants. Two young men with absolutely gorgeous bodies were doing warm-up exercises, their bronze skin gleaming in the sun.

“Look at Galinos,” Pasha was saying. “If he looks at me, I shall faint.”

“Orion is much better, and he is a duke,” Eleni said. “I heard that he grappled with a serpent with bare hands.”

Clio could hardly believe her ears. Had they all forgotten Lukas? Wasn’t it just a while ago they were batting eyelashes at the prince?

As if she were able to read Clio’s mind, Phila gave a dramatic sigh. “Isn’t it heaven to have so many desirable men in one place? Makes it so hard to choose one.”

The ceremony began. Lukas strode to the center of the stadium and delivered a short speech, basically wishing all the participants would have a worthwhile match. Clio watched him, noting how earnest he looked when he was standing in for his uncle. He could be serious when he chose to.

Then it was time for the performers of the opening ceremony. Roxane’s dance troupe, arrayed in vibrant dresses and wide belts, with wreaths of flowers in their hair, advanced to the center of the stadium amid tumultuous applause.

The dancing in the village had been spontaneous and carefree while the ceremonial dance was refined, skillful, and carefully choreographed. Clio was so enthralled that she almost forgot she had to sneak away to Lukas’s room.

When the dancing was over, Clio quickly scribbled that she had to go to the latrines and climbed out of her seat. No one paid her any attention. The

bells jingled on her ankles, but the din in the stadium was enough to drown out the sound.

As she dashed toward the palace, Clio noted with relief that only a few servants were around. Everyone had gone to watch the games. She barely had time to strip off her anklets and stuff them into her pocket as she tore through the gardens and past the griffin statue, where two men were having a fight.

Wait, what? Shouldn’t they take it out in the tournament?

Then she froze, as if a hundred electric eels had sent a shock through her.

A masked man was grappling with Lukas. He had a knife in his hand, the edge stained with blood.

19

Clio stood immobilized in terror. For a moment, her mind went completely blank. Even if she could've screamed, she wouldn't have been able to make a sound as Lukas panted from the effort of holding off his attacker, which jolted her from her trance.

Instantly, she knew she had to either help him herself or seek help. Both options seemed impossible at the moment. Everyone had gone to see the tournament, and even if she could run and find someone else strong enough to overpower the masked man, Lukas would probably already be done for.

She could try to help the prince, but she'd never fought anyone, unless she counted her tussling with Kostas when they were eight. Furthermore, she had no weapon. The only thing she could do was to distract the attacker and buy time for Lukas to escape.

All these thoughts flashed through her mind in mere seconds, and Clio knew she had to act fast. Plunging a hand into her pocket, she threw everything—notebook, pencil, anklets, everything she had—at the masked man. The objects bounced off his back easily, but the impact was enough to make him turn around.

Terror paralyzed her limbs when the masked man stared at her. The next second, he grunted. Lukas had landed a powerful kick on his back. The man stumbled then took off running.

"Stop!" Lukas shouted. He winced but, after a second, raced after the man.

Clio sank onto the ground as if she'd reverted to her original state of wobbly legs. Who was that man? And why did he try to kill Lukas?

A while later, a flash of white and gold appeared. Lukas had returned. The frustration on his face was replaced by concern when he saw her sitting on the grass.

“Clio.” His voice was gentle—since when did Lukas sound so tender? Squatting in front of her, he took her hands. “Did he hurt you?”

She shook her head but then noticed blood trickling down his side. He was injured, yet he was asking her if she got hurt.

Lukas noticed the direction of her gaze and gave her a lopsided grin. “Don’t worry. It’s just a scratch. No vital organs were stabbed. It will heal in a jiffy.”

Clio glared. A scratch didn’t produce so much blood. She grabbed her pencil and wrote, *Hogwash. Go treat that wound, or I’ll clout your head.*

“All right; I surrender.” He held up his hands. “I guess I should get this wound treated, after all. Can’t have blood trickling down my side when I return to the tournament.”

Instead of heading to the doctor’s office, where she once had her foot examined, Lukas led her back to the stadium. The medics were all employed to look after the participants in the tournament since it was so easy for them to get injured.

Lukas requested a private tent, where a trusted doctor cut away the side of Lukas’s shirt so he could treat the wound. He asked Lukas how he got himself stabbed, but the prince merely shook his head. “I’d appreciate it if you keep this quiet,” he said in a low voice. “I don’t want the crowd out there knowing I’ve been hurt. Fortunately, the wound is shallow enough.”

The doctor puckered his forehead but didn’t ask further questions. Clio found a clean shirt for Lukas to wear over his wound, while the doctor wrapped fresh bandages around Lukas’s body.

Just a moment after the doctor finished, a servant outside the tent yelled that they had a participant who’d gotten his arm broken. The doctor apologized and left, but not before telling Lukas to handle the wound with care.

“Clio,” Lukas said quietly. She turned to look at him, suddenly afraid that he’d ask why she wasn’t at the tournament, and he pulled her into an embrace.

“Thank you,” he whispered in her hair. “This is the second time you saved my life.”

This was the second time in the day that Clio's mind went blank. She couldn't think of what to do except to stay still. Lukas's arms felt strong and secure, his voice calm and soothing, his scent tantalizing.

A while later, he pulled away.

"As much as I wish to prolong that embrace," he said, his mischievous grin back in place, "unfortunately there is a tournament I must see to. Mind if we return separately? And don't talk to anyone about that attack. I will investigate it, but I don't want to cause unnecessary panic."

Clio nodded. It wasn't as if she could scribble on her notebook about the incident and show it to everyone.

When she returned to her seat, Clio found that the others had barely missed her. The trio oohed and aahed at the glistening muscles of the participants. However, Clio found that she was unable to enjoy the show. Alik had returned, and he looked pale and wan, as if he was suffering from a stomachache, but then he was a good actor. If he had used the excuse to sneak away and trick Lukas into leaving the stadium, he had plenty of opportunity to do so.

"Martin! MARTIN!"

It was only at the very end, when Martin was crowned for defending his title and Damen (much to her disappointment, he was a better fighter than she'd thought) the runner-up, that Clio finally let her mind return to the tournament.

20

"What did he look like?" Alik leaned forward, the desperate look in his eyes bearing down on her like the shadow of a whale.

Were Clio able to speak, she would have stammered. *He wore a mask.* Her hand shook; she gripped the pencil tight. *I couldn't see what he looked like. It was so frightening, I didn't have the time to observe and remember.*

"Don't be too hard on her, Uncle." Lukas patted her shoulder then made a face when his wound affected him. "I was the one closest to him, and I couldn't tell what he looked like, either. The mask he wore only showed his eyes, and it fit around his head so tightly that I couldn't rip it off while fighting him off."

They were sitting in Alik's private chamber, in the receiving room he reserved for guests. After the assassin had fled, Lukas had returned to the tournament and stayed in his seat for the entire time, looking as if nothing had happened, save for an occasional flash of pain in his expression.

Clio felt bad for him. The crowd was cheering, yelling, and whistling, the atmosphere upbeat and exuberant, but he had to fake his smiles and pretend that he was enjoying it all while, in the back of his mind, the assassin lurked.

Alik was grim. With his gray hair, he looked older than usual.

"This assassin, whoever he is, obviously had planned it well. He knew all the bodyguards were in the arena. First, my cup was tampered with so I had to leave the event…"

“What did the doctor say?” Lukas interrupted. “Are you truly recovered now, Uncle?”

Alik still looked a little pale, but he waved the concern aside. “I’m fine. The doctor examined my cup and suggested that a purgative was slipped into my drink. It’s not poison, but obviously, it is not an experience I wish to relive. Anyway, back to the topic. What made you leave the stadium if you weren’t poisoned?”

“I was delivered a message,” Lukas said, showing a soiled piece of paper. The handwriting looked childish, all squiggly lines and haphazard dots, like someone who didn’t want his handwriting to be recognized. Or maybe it was done by a child, paid to write the letter. “Something about a few thugs gambling illegally outside the stadium. I came out to look into it, and when I went past the statue, the man jumped out and attacked me.”

“And when she found you, the man just ran off?”

“That’s what puzzles me as well,” Lukas admitted. “Clio can’t scream, and even if she went for help, it would be too late. I guess he didn’t know she was mute and ran for it.”

Alik turned his piercing gaze at Clio. “Why did you go back to the palace? Why weren’t you at the tournament?”

Here was something Clio wasn’t able to answer. She couldn’t very well say that she wanted to steal something from Lukas’s room.

In a desperate effort, she wrote, *My pencil was broken. So I had to run back to my room to get a new one.*

Alik didn’t seem convinced. Before he could fire off another question, a man knocked at the door and handed Lukas a sheaf of papers, neatly folded. Clio recognized the man as one of the sentinels who stood guard at the palace gates.

“The report you requested, Your Highness.” He bowed. “Everyone who exited the palace tonight has been searched thoroughly. None of them carried a knife or a black outfit.”

“Very good, Rouvin.” Lukas turned to Clio. “Can I borrow your notebook?”

He scribbled a message on Clio’s notebook, tore off the page, and gave it to the sentinel. “For the extra work.”

“Your Highness is too generous.” The sentinel bowed again and left the room.

“How much did you offer him?” Alik asked.

“Ten silver pieces.” Lukas was now riffling through the sheaf of papers. “It is no easy job cataloguing all the people who exited the palace gates after the tournament.”

“Anyone suspicious?”

“I doubt it.” Lukas handed over the sentinel’s report to his uncle.

Clio touched Lukas’s elbow to get his attention. *Are you trying to discover if the assassin has escaped?*

He gave her a wry smile. “I didn’t think we’d be able to discover him today, given the number of people at the tournament, but it’s worth a try.”

“True.” Alik laid the report on his desk. “Any one of those guests could have slipped away and attempted the attack. And we cannot rule out the people who are still staying in the palace.”

“I’d say the latter is more likely,” Lukas said. “If they were able to put a purgative in your cup, it should be someone in the palace. We’ll need to conduct an investigation.”

Clio glanced at Lukas. He didn’t seem overly worried or anxious about the attempt on his life. Maybe he was a maestro at concealing his true feelings—an art that any future monarch would do well to master. He noticed her gaze and sent her a melting smile.

“Clio saved my life. If she didn’t pelt the attacker with her—er—notebook, I might be dead by now.”

Alik nodded. He looked at Clio and made a magnanimous gesture. “You may name your reward.”

Lukas’s eyes twinkled. “How about my hand in marriage?”

Alik shot a glare at his nephew.

Clio rolled her eyes though her heart did skip a beat when Lukas made the outrageous joke. She didn’t want anything except to return to the sea. Other than that, she was content with her life at the palace.

I don’t want anything. The prince’s safety is enough for me.

Alik and Lukas looked at each other. Alik’s eyes were wide, as if he couldn’t believe she didn’t want compensation, while Lukas raised his eyebrows.

“I have an idea,” Lukas said. “Let Clio accompany me to the Anuran prince’s wedding next month. I am sure she will enjoy the event.”

Clio tilted her head, intrigued. A wedding held on land?

“But what if her sister returns?”

Clio was jerked back to reality. Mortimer could return and turn her back into a mermaid.

Lukas turned to her, his eyes pleading. “Please, Clio. Don’t you want a chance to attend a royal wedding? Plus, the prince is marrying Martin’s twin, which should make it even more interesting.”

She hesitated. She would like to meet Martin’s twin and see what his beauty looked like on a girl. If it were tomorrow, she would have loved to go, but since it was next month… What if Mortimer showed up and she was gone?

“It would be a splendid event. The Anuran palace is beautiful—their architecture differs from ours, and the wedding will be held in a huge garden. There will be loads to eat and drink, and of course there will be dancing…”

Since there wouldn’t be another chance like this in her lifetime… Clio relented and wrote, *All right*. She’d tell Nerissa to let Mortimer know where she went, in case he returned while she was in Anura.

Alik gave his nephew a hard look. “Surely you know what this signifies?”

Lukas grinned. “Don’t worry, Uncle. There’s still a month. And she is entirely free to choose by herself.”

Clio looked between them, wondering what they meant. She took up her pencil to scribble a question, but Alik rose from his chair.

“It’s been a long day,” he said. “Get you off to bed right now. We’ll look into that mysterious attacker tomorrow… With so many staff in the palace, it’s going to be a nightmare.”

That night, Clio didn’t sleep well. She kept dreaming of the masked man springing up in front of her, the bloodied knife in his hand. It wasn’t until well past midnight that she finally drifted away to slumber, the blankets of her bed completely mussed up.

21

Although Lukas and Alik tried their best to cover up the assassination attempt, gossip spread. Soon, everyone knew that during the tournament, the prince was attacked, and the mute girl who used to walk like a duck had saved him. While Lukas could no longer pretend it was an accident, he managed to shift the focus from a possible conspiracy to a deranged madman.

"Was it true that you saved the prince from that madman's attack?" Hermia asked one day as she brought in fresh laundry.

Clio nodded but didn't offer more details. It wasn't something she wanted to relive.

"Where was the prince attacked?" Hermia pressed on, relentless.

Reluctantly she wrote, *In the gardens. By the griffin statue.*

"And nothing was found about the attacker? Didn't you, by any chance, get a good look at him?"

Clio shook her head.

"Well, what a pity." Hermia headed to the door. "If you had no idea what he looked like and if he didn't leave anything behind, then it's going to be really difficult trying to find him." She sighed. "Hope it was just a madman. The maids are all scared he'll reappear."

That was why Lukas hadn't wanted others to learn about the assassination attempt.

Unable to sit still, Clio went into the gardens. There was a strained tension in the air as servants and nobles alike passed, a few of them casting her curious glances.

Somehow, she ended up approaching the griffin statue but ducked behind a tree when she saw Phila and Pasha were heading in the direction of the palace gates, several servants in tow.

Phila was saying, "…don't think it's possible. Lukas only has eyes for her."

"I should have known that in the beginning," Pasha grumbled. "Wouldn't have wasted those months. I could have attended more parties instead of being stuck here with nothing but the boring old village."

"Besides, isn't it scary about what happened to Lukas? They haven't caught the attacker yet. Maybe it's a better idea to settle for someone else…"

So Pasha and Phila were leaving. That left only Eleni as the remaining candidate. Alik would be pleased.

The griffin statue seemed to glow in the daylight, the white marble smooth and polished. It struck Clio how strange it was that the masked man had attacked Lukas here. If he really wanted to kill the prince, why didn't he choose a more secluded spot? Even though everyone was at the tournament, it still seemed risky to stab the prince in broad daylight.

Clio looked around. The blood had, of course, been cleaned, leaving no evidence that there had been a struggle. As she inspected the area around the statue, something glittering in the grass caught her eye.

Her heart pounding, Clio squatted on the grass and picked up the object. It was a silver ring, the band marked with simple carvings. An inscription was engraved inside: For King and Country.

Clio closed her fist around the ring and tucked it in her pocket. A clue! Mr. Mask must have dropped it during his tussle with Lukas.

She raced back to the palace, her skirts flying behind her and her hair swirling around like a cloud. Just a few weeks ago, she had been tottering around on shaky knees. Now, she could run like the wind.

Where's Lukas? Clio showed her notebook to a servant who was cleaning Lukas's bedroom.

She found him seated in a small office situated a little way off the portrait gallery. When she came in, he was busy writing something at his desk. A pile of papers were strewn around him, and there were books filling the shelves. So this was what Lukas did when he was busy. She could see why he wanted to sneak off to Olini once in a while. She would scream if she had to be cooped up in this tiny room all day.

“Hello, darling.” Lukas raised his head, and a smile spread over his face, making her blush. “What brought you here? You are just what I need after a long session of reading the backgrounds of the palace staff. Sit down.” He patted a chair near him.

Clio complied and wrote in her notebook, *Have you discovered anything suspicious?*

“Unfortunately, no. My mysterious attacker has been cunning indeed.”

Where is your uncle?

“He’s gone for a meeting with the Assembly. He originally wanted me to come as well, but considering this nasty wound on my side, he decided to let me rest.”

Does it hurt a lot?

“You mean my wound? It stings, but don’t worry about it. When you stepped into the room, the pain in my side stopped hurting.”

Clio rolled her eyes, but she didn’t want to argue with him. Instead, she held out the ring.

I found this in the grass near the griffin statue where you were attacked.

Lukas turned the ring over in his palm, surprise evident in his eyes. “You found this?”

The attacker must have dropped this ring.

“Well, it can’t be his. This ring belongs to my uncle.” He opened a drawer and slipped the ring inside. “I’ll have to give it back to him when the Assembly is over.”

Clio stared at him. She couldn’t believe that Alik would have dropped his ring by accident.

“If you’re suspicious that my uncle attacked me, forget about it,” Lukas said, as if reading her mind. “We already had the place searched, and no one saw the ring. Uncle must have dropped it after the attacker left.”

Clio pursed her lips. It was likely what he said was true—there was no telling if the ring was dropped by the attacker—but her suspicions remained all the same.

Still, she couldn’t help feeling wary. Lukas was nearly drowned on his birthday. And someone tried to kill him during the tournament. Who had designs on the Caladonian prince? Who could want him dead other than his uncle?

Clio decided to look for Maurice, Alik's personal servant. She had heard Lukas complain occasionally that Maurice was just as fussy as his uncle—as if having someone like Alik wasn't enough.

On her way, she nearly ran into a stocky young man who bore some resemblance to Lukas, but the leery grin on his face made her edge farther away from him. Damen, the runner-up in the tournament.

"Hey, pretty lady." He made an attempt to waylay her, but Clio could move just as well as any human by now and easily dodged his outstretched arm. "I was just trying to be friendly…wait!"

Luckily, a group of servants carrying baskets of laundry passed by. Like an eel, Clio slipped through the servants and made a deft turn into another corridor. Damen may be a powerful fighter, but he wasn't as nimble on his feet.

Soon she found Maurice, who was polishing Alik's boots in his room. She wasted no time writing out her question and showed her notebook to him.

"Are you serious?"

Maurice stared at her with blazing eyes. "Are you asking me where the regent went during the tournament?"

Clio tried her best to act naïve and innocent. *It was a bit strange that he wasn't there for most of the time…*

Maurice gave her a hard, searching look. "He was indisposed. Believe me, my master is an admirable man who takes his responsibilities very seriously. Were it not for the food that upset his stomach, he would have been there the entire time."

So, during the time he had his stomachache, was he in his room all the time?

Maurice looked furious. "He was in the latrines all the time! Off with you, you insolent girl. If I see the prince, I shall tell him what a nuisance you are. Questioning the whereabouts of the regent… the nerve of you. Get out!"

Clio left the room, her mind in a haze of confusion. So unless Maurice was lying, which was highly unlikely, Alik really had a stomachache. On the other hand, it was possible that Alik had simply hired someone to assassinate his nephew, but if it really was Alik, he could have done away with his nephew a long time ago. He'd had years to take care of Lukas. All evidence pointed towards Alik, but nothing made sense.

22

"Everyone loved the soaps!" Nerissa gushed, her eyes bright and sparkling. She had signaled through the anglerfish that afternoon, not long after Clio discovered Alik's ring. "Even Mama praised them, and you know how hard it is to please her."

Tell me about it, Clio thought, flexing her toes in the cool water. The queen of Thalassa had the fortune to be blessed with perfection, whether it was her appearance or accomplishments, and rarely ever spared praise for anything, including her offspring. The king was less demanding but nevertheless had a certain standard of expectations. It was then Clio realized how similar she was to Lukas—only that Alik pushed his nephew harder, while her parents simply ignored her.

"And guess what—Papa mentioned this morning that since you are on land, you could ask the Caladonian prince if they would be interested in signing a trade agreement."

Clio wiped away a drop of water that splashed onto her notebook and blinked. *Are you serious? Papa wants us to do trade with Caladonia?*

"Since you got transformed into a human, Papa had been considering the possibilities of improving our relations with the humans. And when everyone was fighting over the soaps you brought, he said that instead of making everyone arm wrestle for a limited supply of human merchandise, why not open up legal opportunities to import the products? We also have much to offer. I doubt the humans will say no to a rich source of pearls, coral, aquamarine beryls…"

I don't know. It sounds like a good idea, but we've rarely had any contact with humans since Grandpa signed the peace treaty.

Nerissa gave a sly grin. "Kostas suggested you could just marry Lukas. That would make dealing with the humans even easier."

Clio looked heavenward. She wasn't surprised at her brother's suggestion. Kostas always preferred to use the least amount of effort to achieve what he wanted.

All right.

"Great—er—we're talking about the trade agreement, right?"

Clio made to grab her sister's tail, but Nerissa was as slippery as a sea snake. *Of course I'm talking about trade! Do you think I'd fall for a flirt? And…* She paused on the page, feeling down when she thought about Lucanus, but she didn't feel like sharing her despondency with Nerissa, when neither of them could do anything about it. Instead she wrote, *I'm sorry I totally forgot about Thisbe. So much has happened since the tournament.*

"Oh, I forgot—don't worry about the brat," Nerissa said. "She bumped into Kostas when he finished a sparring match. He wasn't wearing a shirt, and that somehow made her go all gooey eyes for him. She doesn't have a huge crush on Lukas anymore."

Well, that was a relief.

"And what're you talking about—a tournament?"

Clio opened her bag and handed over a gleaming silver gauntlet.

Nerissa ran her hand over the metal, her face puzzled. For once, there was a human object that she didn't know about. "What's this glove for? It seems awfully heavy and uncomfortable."

It's protective gear that they wore at the tournament, Clio wrote. *And this was worn by the champion. I had to coax and beg the wearer to give it up to me.*

"You must have been really persuasive."

Clio resisted a grin. Actually, she had practically threatened Martin by saying she would ask Lukas to make him wear a pink uniform. Knowing how the prince wouldn't mind a chance to tease and torment, Martin had acquiesced without fuss.

You could wear this while digging up treasure. That way, your hand would be safe from those poisonous seaweeds.

"What's this tournament thing? Is the process similar to our duels?"

Clio related as much as she could remember—the procedure, the regulations, the crowds, and even the vendors selling snacks outside the stadium. The merpeople also had a similar competition, in which they battled with three-pronged spears and the first one who grazed his opponent's tail with the trident would be declared the winner. However, Nerissa was intrigued all the same.

"It sounds *so* intense. But you said you missed the final competition. What happened?"

I wanted to get something for Thisbe, and something terrible happened. Clio told her sister everything about the assassination attempt.

Nerissa gasped. "Why would someone have designs on Lukas's life?"

He is the sole heir to the throne, Clio wrote. *He will always have enemies, no matter what his character is like.*

"And you found his uncle's ring near the spot where Lukas was attacked?"

Clio nodded. *But he refused to believe that Alik is up to anything suspicious. Lukas claims that they had searched the area before I did, so the ring must have been dropped after the attack.*

Nerissa scrunched up her face, deep in thought. "I can't imagine the regent wanting to kill his own nephew. Even if he wanted the throne, it seems a lot of effort. He could have just disposed of Lukas when he was a child."

But it's odd all the same. Alik wasn't at the tournament when Lukas was attacked. He had a stomachache.

"Maybe someone is trying to frame Alik as a target," Nerissa suggested. "Trying to throw the suspicion on him so they won't be discovered."

That's possible. But why? Why would they do that?

Nerissa flipped over on her back and floated in the water. "Beats me if I know."

23

While Clio wasn't sure what she could do about Lukas's mysterious attacker, she was eager to discuss the possibilities of opening trade opportunities with Caladonia. Having visited Olini and seen what the humans had to offer, she would be sorry if she no longer had access to their products and had to rely on careless sailors.

She half skipped, half walked to Lukas's office, but he wasn't there. Frowning, Clio hailed a servant, but he had no idea where the prince had gone. This wasn't like Lukas. She debated going to Alik but dismissed the thought quickly. She'd just have to wait until Lukas returned, that was all. It wasn't as if the trade agreement had to be signed today.

Clio headed back to her room. As she mounted a flight of stairs, a voice coming from the floor above made her pause.

"Hello, Clio."

Lukas, dressed casually in a white linen shirt and dark trousers, was descending the stairs with Eleni on his arm. The petite young noblewoman was beautifully dressed and styled in flowing silk the color of ripe green grapes, her hair done in matching green ribbons. She smiled at Clio in a way that seemed mocking and triumphant, as if she had won a tournament herself.

"Hermia has been looking for you," Lukas said. "Where have you been?"

Clio gestured at the window, which happened to show a glorious view of the beach.

"How fond you are of the sea," Eleni remarked.

Because I grew up in the sea, Clio wanted to reply. She wondered, rather unkindly, how Eleni would survive if she grew a tail. Possibly, she'd shriek and scream, given how scared she was of a mere sand beetle.

"We're going down to Olini," Lukas said. "There's a waterfront restaurant Eleni has always favored."

Eleni's smile grew wider. Something in her look indicated that this was a meal just for the two of them.

"You might as well come with us," Lukas said, surprising both Eleni and Clio. "Roxane sent a message; she wants to talk to you."

Clio raised an eyebrow. What could Roxane want with her?

"Please hurry and change," Eleni said, glancing at the hem of Clio's dress, which had been soaked while she was sitting on the rocks. "Lukas and I have made reservations, and it wouldn't do to show up late."

Clio stalked back to her room with an ignoble desire to put a sand beetle in Eleni's pocket.

❧

AS SHE WATCHED ELENI WALK DAINTILY OVER THE COBBLESTONE STREETS, Lukas holding onto her elbow to support her, Clio felt something tug at her heart. They looked good together—Eleni's doll-like features and Lukas's casual good looks made them an attractive couple. Even though she told herself she wanted only Lucanus, Clio found herself wishing it was she walking beside Lukas.

When they came to a junction near the soap vendor, Lukas turned. "Well, this is where we part ways," he said, pointing at a pretty white house with a flat blue roof near the sea. It was built on a small cliff overlooking the waves. "They have a spectacular view of the ocean. It's the safest way you can dine and not worry about having water splashed in your face. And the seafood is the freshest you've ever tasted."

Lukas was going to have lunch with the girl his uncle hoped he would marry. Could he be so affected by that assassination attempt that he'd decided it was time to settle down?

Clio shrugged. It wasn't as if she cared. She didn't care who Lukas invited to dinner. Right?

“I don’t know how long Roxane will take, but if it’s late, ask her to have Felix bring you back to the palace.”

So he didn’t even want to wait for her. Clio looked down at the ground then up again. He was already holding his arm out for Lady Eleni. Well, so be it. She held her head high and stalked in the direction of Roxane’s house. If he wanted an undisturbed private meal with his intended, then who was she to interfere?

❧

“Clio!” Roxane welcomed her with open arms. “How nice it is to see you! Where’s Lukas?”

He went to the waterfront restaurant with Lady Eleni and Martin.

Roxane frowned. “That’s the first time I’ve heard of him taking a girl to that restaurant.”

Maybe he has decided to heed his uncle’s advice.

“Maybe,” Roxane said slowly. “Is he all right from that assassination attempt? We were so worried when we heard about it.”

He seems to be fine now, Clio wrote. *But we did have to come on the carriage; he hasn’t recovered enough to ride on horseback. Do you have any idea who might do this to him?*

Roxane looked thoughtful. “I can’t see the lad having any enemies. Sure, he likes to joke around and flirt a bit, but he has a good heart.”

Clio nodded. They still hadn’t found anything after combing through the backgrounds of the palace staff. Maybe it was a good thing Mortimer was taking so long with that sea witch. By this time, even if he showed up, she wanted to stay on land until Lukas’s attacker was caught. She couldn’t go back to the sea with the apprehension hanging over her mind.

“I suppose you’re curious why I invited you down here.”

You baked another almond pie?

Roxane grinned. “Not today, but I’ll definitely make it next time you come. Do you remember the dancing we did during the tournament?”

How could I forget? It was a spectacular performance.

Roxane’s eyes sparkled. “I’m glad you enjoyed it. However, something disastrous happened. One of our dancers, Persephone, twisted her ankle

when she was performing. We would have liked her to continue practice after she recovers, but she left us."

Why? Was her injury too serious?

"She could have chosen to continue, but her father had other plans. She came from a rich family. Her father made a fortune selling silks and dyes, and he didn't want her to continue performing. Remember what I told you about the difficulties of our dance troupe? I hate to say this, but in Caladonia, a dancer doesn't command the same respect as, let's say, a doctor. The pay isn't good, the work is unstable, and there's always the chance of injury."

That's a pity. Your dancing is so elegant. It is a feast for the eyes.

Roxane placed her elbows on the table and leaned forward. "Can you do a pirouette?"

Clio's jaw dropped. She thought Roxane was going to persuade her to donate to the troupe, but it looked as though the retired dancer had something different in mind.

"Lukas told me that you used to dance."

How did he know? It had to be Nerissa—who else could have told Lukas she could dance?

With some difficulty, Clio scratched out, *That was before. I don't think I can dance now.*

Roxane was relentless. "Try it. And take off your shoes—they look too stiff for the movement."

Clio didn't think she could do it. She could walk and run like any human, but dancing? She couldn't dance without her tail, yet she found she wanted to do it. There were times when she sat in front of the windows, gazing at the rolling waves and thinking about when she used to twirl around with Zooey.

She took off her shoes and walked to the center of the room. Roxane watched, her gaze sharp and observing.

Clio spun around. She fell.

She tried again and wobbled. Her toe ached.

On her third try, she managed to perform a very shaky pirouette, but she didn't stumble.

"Excellent." Roxane clapped her hands.

Clio glanced up at her, surprised. How could Roxane approve? Her pirouette was hideous. Even Nerissa could do better.

“I can see you have potential.” Roxane stood up and came over to her. “When Lukas recommended that you replace Persephone, I was amazed. I certainly wouldn’t have thought of you when I first met you. But when I saw how you improved after I taught you how to walk, I began to hope that it might be possible. That you could be trained to dance like us.”

You want me to take her place?

“Exactly. As long as you’re willing to do it, Lukas will sponsor you.” Roxane held out her hand. “Will you join us, Clio?”

24

Clio took a step and did a full pirouette on both feet. Roxane had encouraged her to start slow, and once she could spin around without getting dizzy, she could go for the more challenging feat of pirouetting on one foot.

"You have potential," Roxane had said. "All you need is the right guidance and practice."

When Roxane made the request, Clio was taken by surprise, but after a moment's hesitation, she agreed. She had been mesmerized by the dancers whirling around, their skirts flying, their movements balanced and graceful. She wanted a chance to emulate them, to experience the same joy and exhilaration. Even if she returned to the ocean one day… but she'd worry about that when Mortimer arrived.

She was practicing on the terrace, which was empty, thankfully. Rain was pattering on the grounds below, bringing succor to the plants after many days of hot, dry weather. She felt more energized, livelier, enjoying the humidity. With each step she took, she concentrated on the novel feeling of dancing in a human body and pushed all thoughts of a certain prince escorting a beautiful lady out of her mind.

"I thought I'd find you here," Lukas said.

Clio stumbled; she was just getting ready to perform a leap, and his voice had jerked her back, throwing her off balance.

He chuckled and steadied her with a strong hand on her arm.

"Let me guess what's going on in that pretty head of yours," he said. "You're thinking, 'Dang, the prince is so handsome that I'll forgive him for

sneaking up on me.’”

Clio shook off his hand and glared. She picked up her notebook and scribbled, *Shouldn’t you be*—her pencil paused—*at a meeting with your uncle?* She decided not to mention Eleni.

Lukas pointed at a carriage pulling out of the courtyard. It was far away, but she caught a fleeting glimpse before it disappeared around the corner.

“Uncle is going to Areopolis,” he said. “He has left me in charge.”

Clio’s jaw dropped. Why would Alik leave the Summer Palace all of a sudden?

Why?

“He’s taking Eleni back to the capital,” Lukas said. There was no emotion when he spoke, no regret that Eleni was leaving. “Also, he had some urgent business at the Winter Palace. However, he has promised to join me at the Anuran prince’s wedding.”

Clio digested this information. *Why is Eleni returning to the capital?* she finally dared to write.

Lukas glanced at her before refocusing his gaze on the gardens below. “Don’t you remember I took Eleni to the waterfront restaurant? That was when I told her that I could never marry her.”

Clio blinked. When Lukas had escorted Eleni, he didn’t show any signs that he was going to reject her. She had truly believed he was going to heed his uncle’s advice and make Eleni his wife.

But she is beautiful and accomplished.

Lukas shrugged. “She’s a lovely girl, but she is not for me. It would be cruel to keep her waiting, so once I was perfectly sure about it, I had to let her know. She is still young and should have no problem finding a worthy young man deserving of her affections.”

Clio remembered the small, satisfied smirk on Eleni’s face as she descended the stairs with Lukas. For a moment, she felt sorry for the noblewoman, yet deep down inside, she also felt a curious lightness, as if a fetter around her heart was lifted.

Lukas was gazing at her as he leaned against one of the stone pillars. He used to smirk and wink when she was around, but today he was acting uncommonly serious. Something in his eyes… He began to walk toward her. Her heart started to flutter.

Clio wrote furiously in her notebook and held the page in front of him. She had a feeling about what he was going to say, but she wasn’t ready yet.

There were so many problems that had to be resolved first.

Would you be interested in doing trade with Thalassa?

He stared at the page for a few seconds. “Trade? With the merpeople?”

Yes. My sister thought it would be a good idea. She believes Caladonia could benefit from the rich resources the ocean has to offer, and Thalassa would love to have access to human merchandise without resorting to scavenging from sunken ships.

Lukas broke into a brilliant smile—a smile that reminded her of a bright blue sky when the weather was lovely. “That sounds an excellent idea. Uncle would definitely be interested. He used to say that the best thing Grandfather did was resolve the conflict between humans and merpeople, though it’s a pity that there wasn’t further interaction. He also told me that Father had considered reaching out as well but never found a good opportunity.”

He moved closer and sat down next to her. “Perhaps I’ll be the one to help him fulfill his hopes. A trade agreement would be a good place to start.” A mischievous glint appeared in his eyes. “A marriage alliance would be great as well.”

Clio widened her eyes. He couldn’t be implying… Did he want to marry her? But he never seemed serious about her. Not knowing how to react, she decided to stick to the original topic.

Please talk to your uncle about it, she quickly wrote. *Trade, I mean, not marriage.*

“I certainly will. Although Uncle has left for Areopolis, he instructed me to write him every day.” Lukas gave a dramatic sigh. “Even when he’s miles away, I cannot escape his tyranny.” He stood up and held out his arm. “Shall we go in? As much as I wish to spend time with you alone, the messenger will be arriving soon. I have to add your suggestion to my letter before it goes out to him.”

25

"Keep your eyes focused on a spot when you turn," Roxane barked. "And stay on your toes!"

Clio tried, but it was harder to do a full pirouette on one foot than out-swim a sailfish, which could complete three hundred feet in three seconds.

In the water, she didn't have to worry about tripping and landing on her bottom. She used to perform multiple pirouettes in a series without breaking a sweat. Now she was struggling to stay on her feet. Just when she thought she wouldn't have any problem with falling over, once she mastered the art of walking upright, dancing presented her with a new set of challenges.

She was standing in the backyard of Roxane's house, practicing a traditional Caladonian dance. The choreography was elegant yet tough, requiring her to be quick on her feet and flexible in her limbs, ending in a series of full pirouettes and a graceful leap in the air. Clio found it inspiring to watch when Roxane did it, although in a rather watered-down version, since she could no longer move around as gracefully as she had in her youth.

She wanted to learn the dance, and she found that she wanted to learn it not just because she wanted to impress someone else but simply for the sake of achieving a worthy challenge.

Plop. Her head spinning, Clio missed her step and sat on the grass. The familiar pain of landing on her bottom returned.

Why do humans have such clumsy feet? Clio felt like screaming in the air, but deep in her mind, she knew it was her problem. Roxane wasn't

clumsy when she danced.

“Your movements are too stiff. Too wooden.” Roxane clucked her tongue. She had seemed so friendly when serving almond pie and joking with Lukas. However, when she was teaching, she transformed into a terrifying, demanding tyrant who reminded Clio of Alik. “You need more rhythm in your feet! Think as if you were practicing to music. You cannot just perform the movements, you have to do them with feeling.”

Clio practiced until the sweat poured down her face, and she kept having to reach for a towel. The dancers in the village had made it look so easy—effortless—yet she didn’t complain. There was a savage kind of satisfaction in trying to conquer her wobbly toes.

“All right, that will be all for today.” Roxane clapped her hands. “Take off your shoes, put on your slippers, and come into the house. You deserve some refreshments after that long session.”

Clio gladly moved into the shade, away from the scorching sun. At the table, Felix was already munching on a generous slice of almond pie. He gave Clio a grin when she entered.

“Having fun?”

No wonder he was friends with Lukas. They both were amused when she was in trouble.

Clio flipped open her notebook and wrote, *Your mother is a tyrant*.

He laughed. “That’s why I could never be a dancer. I wouldn’t be able to survive.”

“I wouldn’t bother teaching you anyway,” Roxane said, entering the kitchen, carrying a pitcherful of lemonade. “The way you lumber around like a clumsy elephant, I know it’s better not to waste my time. People can’t believe we’re related.”

“Not everyone can walk on water.” Felix downed a huge glass of lemonade and burped. “By the way, why didn’t Lukas come down? With Alik gone, I thought he’d use it to his advantage.”

He’s been busy. Busier than when Alik was here.

“Give the lad some credit,” Roxane said. “He might not be a workaholic like his uncle, but he has a sense of duty. Speaking of work, it’s high time you get out and start clearing those weeds in the yard. If they keep growing at this rate, Clio’s going to trip over them, and she’s already falling over too many times.”

Felix made a wry face. “See what I have to put up with?”

Roxane tossed a pair of gloves into his lap. “Quit complaining. You live in my house, you abide by my rules. Or find yourself a wife and move out.”

Felix looked as if she had pierced him with the kitchen knife. Clearly, he was embarrassed that Roxane mentioned his (dismal?) marriage prospects in front of a young woman. Muttering and grumbling, he pushed back his chair and went outside.

Clio felt a bit sorry for him though she couldn’t help wanting to laugh. The way Roxane bossed her son around was hilarious.

How long has Alik been acting as regent?

“Since the late king died… Lukas was about three years old then.” She counted on her fingers. “So it has to be around eighteen years, since he turned twenty-one this year.”

And how much longer will Alik be regent?

“Until Lukas is crowned king.…” Roxane gave her a suspicious look. “Why are you asking this?”

Clio quickly shook her head. *Alik seems to yell at him a lot.*

Roxane crossed her arms. “That’s just Alik’s way of educating his nephew. Alik has been brought up in the old ways—obeying the rules with no room for error, while Lukas is more laid-back.”

That sounds harsh.

“I don’t blame Alik, actually. Lukas has a good heart, and he’s a smart boy, but he doesn’t want to put in the work. If it hadn’t been for Alik, Lukas might have grown up to be a man with charming manners but without any real intellectual ability. But I also think Alik should yell less and let the boy have a break. Too much restriction could have an opposite effect.”

Clio thought that Roxane’s judgment was wise. It also made it less likely that Alik would want the throne for himself, otherwise he wouldn’t have spent so much effort grooming Lukas to be the future king. Still, the niggle of doubt remained in her mind.

Was the king old when he died?

“No, he was quite young, actually. There was an accident when he traveled from Olini to Areopolis. He fell off his horse, and Alik tried to give him the best treatment available, but it wasn’t easy while on the road, and eventually it was too late.”

Clio digested this information in her head.

“But if you’re thinking that Alik was alone with the king on that trip, he wasn’t. At the time of the king’s death, he had his affianced second wife by

his side.”

Here was something that Nerissa had never told her before. Perhaps her sister didn’t know the late king had been engaged for a second time when he died. Strange. She had never heard anyone talk about the old king considering remarriage.

He was going to marry again?

“Since Lukas’s mother died, everyone urged the king to remarry. He finally found a beautiful but empty-headed peasant girl called Kallista. Many disapproved his choice, especially Alik, who wanted the king to marry the daughter of a highly ranked general. He believed that the lady, carefully brought up in a sheltered household, would be more suitable then an unrefined peasant girl who could barely read.”

Kallista. She had heard the name before… but when?

“Well, when the king died, everyone was hostile to his fiancée. It didn’t help that Kallista hadn’t had the opportunity to bear a royal child. Soon after they held the funeral, she fled. Without high connections, and with the king gone, she couldn’t survive being at court.”

Clio remembered now. The trio had told her about Kallista before, although at that time, they only described her as a lowly commoner who failed to become queen. They had warned her not to try to seduce Lukas, or Clio would only end up like Kallista—banished from court.

Roxane cut off a large piece of almond pie, wrapped it up in a clean cloth, and put it in a basket. “Take this back with you. I’m sure Lukas will appreciate it if he’s working as hard as you say.”

Clio nodded. *Thank you. You really are like a mother to him.*

Roxane pursed her lips. “Do you have any feelings for the boy?”

Clio was so surprised that she almost dropped the basket. *You mean Lukas?*

“Of course I mean the prince. Felix won’t ever be able to get a girl to talk more than five minutes with him if he doesn’t correct that blunt way he speaks. There was a girl he liked, and he ruined any chance he had with her by telling her she’d look prettier if she lost weight.” Roxane started clearing the dishes; Clio took a cloth and mopped the table. “I’ve practically raised Lukas, and there’s something different in the way he looks at you.”

He isn’t serious. He just flirts.

“In case you haven’t noticed, he only flirts with you.” Roxane patted her hand. “I know the lad. He wouldn’t pay as much attention to you if he

didn’t like you. If you aren’t already spoken for, you might consider giving him a chance.”

CLIO BARELY LOOKED WHERE SHE WAS GOING AS SHE RETURNED TO THE palace. It was only when she returned to her room, basket in arm, that she realized she had to take the pie to Lukas. In her head, Roxane’s words kept playing in her mind. Could Lukas really be serious about her? He did send away Lady Eleni. Was it truly because he wanted her? But he never acted as though he was in love with her. All his smiles and gestures couldn’t convince her that he was being sincere.

Even if he truly wanted to marry her, would she be able to give up her life in the ocean and live the rest of her life with him? She shook her head. She couldn’t think about it right now. What she did note, however, was that she couldn’t return to the sea without knowing that Lukas’s attacker was caught. She couldn’t have peace of mind until she knew he was safe.

26

The anglerfish on her dresser was glowing when she returned from the village. Grumbling about what a fantastic time Nerissa had picked, Clio swallowed the urge to jump into bed, spread-eagle. Instead, she looked for her sandals. She had worn leather shoes to the village but always preferred sandals when going down to the beach. She slipped out of the room, down the flight of stairs that no longer posed as a nightmare, and went through corridors and hallways until she found the exit.

It was about a twenty-minute walk to the beach, but since she was already half exhausted from the entire day in the village, it took her longer than usual. Nerissa was curled up like a shrimp under a rock, snoozing.

Clio tapped her sister on the shoulder. Nerissa jerked up, unfurled her tail, and raised herself into a sitting position.

“Clio! I’ve been waiting for ages.”

Sorry. Clio plopped down next to her sister. *I was invited to the village today. Roxane was teaching me how to dance.*

Normally, Nerissa would be delighted that Clio had made yet another step to absorb human culture, but today, her sister didn’t seem her usual enthusiastic, cheery self.

“I’ve got some bad news.” Nerissa looked down at a large white shell on the sand, then back up. “Delia announced her engagement to Lucanus today.”

Clio felt as if the shadow of a huge blue whale had suddenly passed over her. She actually wasn’t as surprised as she should be. When Delia was

in her predator mode, no merman could resist her, and to be honest, Delia probably was a better partner for Lucanus. She was polished and sophisticated, everything that Clio was not. Were Clio really to get together with Lucanus, they might not speak more than ten sentences a day.

"I'm sorry, Clio," Nerissa said, placing a comforting hand on her arm. "If it weren't for that fairy godfather who got Lucanus and Lukas mixed up, you would have a chance."

Clio squeezed her sister's hand and shook her head. *It was my fault in the beginning, when I should have been more active when pursuing Lucanus. I was never competition for Delia. It's all right.*

"Surely there are other mermen out there for you. Or…" Nerissa glanced at Clio's wrist—she was wearing a pretty golden filigree bracelet. Lukas had given her the bracelet after she saved his life from the assassin, insisting she needed something to wear for the wedding. "Have you considered Prince Lukas? You've lived at the palace for months. He's treated you well. Do you think he could be a possibility?"

Roxane's words echoed in her mind: he only flirts with you.

He seems to like me, but I'm not sure if I'm willing to leave the sea for him. Besides, there's the mystery of his attacker. I need to discover who it is before I consider staying.

Nerissa frowned. "By the way, I almost forgot to give you this." She opened her pouch and laid a silver hip flask on the sand. A name was engraved on the lower-right corner of the flask.

Aliksander.

"I found this caught between two rocks on a bed of coral. Kostas told me that, judging from the location, this flask might have fallen off the ship during Lukas's birthday party. The silver looks valuable. Since you're in the palace, you could return it to his uncle."

Clio turned the flask over in her hand. There was a bit of liquid left inside.

No problem.

As she trudged back to the palace, Clio pondered the problem of Alik. As the regent, known for his strict discipline, he shouldn't be so careless when it came to his personal belongings. Was he truly guilty? Or was everything a trap, carefully engineered to make Alik look like the culprit?

Not until she returned to her room did she realize she hadn't even thought of Lucanus and Delia's engagement.

27

Roxane sent word that she had come down with the flu. She wouldn't be able to give Clio lessons, but she encouraged the younger girl to carry on practicing. Clio, while sorry that Roxane was ill, preferred to stay in the palace at the moment. Roxane was kind, but she needed some time to focus and to practice without someone peering over her shoulder. Master the movements, then make them perfect, but she had to master the steps first.

Clio opened the door of her bedroom. Complete silence in the corridor. She almost missed how Alik would yell at his nephew or how Lukas would greet her with his flirtatious winks. She supposed that the prince was already in his office, working on whatever Alik had ordered him to do and possibly also contemplating the possibilities of opening up trade between Thalassa and Caladonia.

Despite the fact he seemed delighted every time she appeared, Clio didn't want to disturb him. She always dined with him anyway, so there was no need to see him in a hurry.

It was another hot, dry, sunny day, and this time she decided to head to the beach. She wanted to enjoy watching the white-tipped waves roll in the distance and the tide ebbing and flowing.

A quarter hour later, she was standing on the beach, watching how the sun shone on the horizon. Somewhere, deep down in the waters, her family was probably celebrating Delia and Lucanus's engagement. Kostas had surfaced a few times, her parents once. They were interested about her life

on land but were content to wait until Mortimer reappeared. While it hurt that they didn't come more frequently, perhaps it was time to let go.

Time to let go of her old crush. Time to give up the desire to be the focal point of her parents' attention. Time to truly live.

On a sudden whim, Clio took off her sandals and stepped onto the sand. She had never danced on the beach nor ever thought of doing it, but somehow it seemed the right thing in the moment. Her bare feet sank into the warmth of the grains, and the wind breezed through her sleeves, making her skirts flutter. She breathed in the salty air, feeling as if the sea were running in her veins.

Clio warmed up, stretching out her limbs and realizing that she was now truly comfortable with her human body. It might not be so bad to have this human body permanently—to walk instead of gliding, to run instead of swimming, and to spend her life under a bright-blue sky instead of under turquoise waters.

One step. Another. She twirled. Whirled. Then made a series of jumps with her legs extended to the front and back.

Possibilities. The future. What would it bring?

Clio danced again. This time, she closed her eyes. She imagined herself merging with the wind, with nature, letting the sound of the waves echo through her body, letting her innate sense of water trickle through her until it seemed her body was no longer inhibited by natural restrictions. She danced, she jumped, she performed all the moves that Roxane had taught her with a new fluidity that she hadn't realized she possessed.

One, two, three… Seven in a row. Without even thinking about the next move, Clio went into a graceful leap, so high in the air that it felt as if she were flying, and came landing on the sand on both feet, exhilaration washing over her like a tidal wave. She gave a final twirl and relaxed into the ending pose, as if the ocean was her audience, the sound of the waves like applause.

Wait… The sound coming from behind her… That was real applause.

Whirling around, Clio came face-to-face with Lukas.

"Bravo," he said, giving her a thumbs-up. "I have to say that is the most beautiful sight I have ever seen."

Clio couldn't help it—she grinned. The sun caught the side of her face, illuminating her features. Lukas stared at her, speechless, until he realized he was staring and promptly coughed.

“Roxane would be pleased. Only a week or two under her tutelage, and you have turned into an outstanding dancer.”

Clio came to sit next to him. *I have been dancing since I was three,* she wrote.

“Did you always enjoy it?”

The words tumbled out of her. No one had asked her the question before. *At that time, I wanted to please my parents. All my sisters had some kind of accomplishment, and I had none. So I started dancing. I had some talent, I was good at it, but at that time, all I could think was once I achieved a spectacular performance, I could impress my parents and prove to them that I was just as good as any of my brothers and sisters.*

“And now?”

I don’t think I care any more for their validation. I want to dance for myself.

“That was what I was hoping you’d say.” He brushed a strand of sweat-soaked hair from her eyes. “Call it coincidence, but I have brought the perfect gift for you.”

He took out a box from the bag he carried. He pulled off the lid, revealing a pair of gilded leather shoes decorated with delicate pink pearls.

If Clio could talk, she would have uttered something like *Giant sharks, they’re cute.*

Are these really for me? she wrote, knowing the answer but having to ask anyway.

Lukas grinned. “Who else could be the recipient? Martin?”

Clio smirked. *He’d be horrified if you tried to gift him shoes like this. But honestly, you didn’t have to present me such an expensive gift.*

“Considering that you will be accompanying me to the royal wedding, it is imperative that we outfit you in splendid attire. Besides, the shoes aren’t as expensive as you think. Roxane made them with her own hands. All I had to do was acquire the material.”

Clio looked up at him, amazed.

“These aren’t ordinary shoes. They are meant for dancing. Roxane thinks you have true potential even if you aren’t used to our Caladonian dances. She knew the size of your feet when she was teaching you earlier and decided that a pair of beautiful, comfortable shoes tailor-made for dancing would enhance your performance.” Lukas laid the box on her lap. “I look forward to seeing you dance at the wedding.”

Thank you. Both you and Roxane. You both have been too kind.

"You've more than repaid Roxane when you agreed to join her dance troupe. As for me…" he took her hand. "If you truly want to thank me, then stay."

She looked up. He was being Earnest Lukas, not Flirting Lukas. The latter she could easily resist, the former she… couldn't. He had found the chink in her armor, and now he used it to his advantage.

"Stay with me, Clio." Lukas tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. "Don't go back to the sea. I need you—stars above…" He swallowed and looked into her eyes. "You can't imagine how much I need you."

When did you…

She didn't even need to finish her sentence. He could read her mind.

"When you saved me that night. Believe it or not, but I heard you when you were muttering how heavy I was and how dumb I was to drown myself. I couldn't see you or speak, but I thought to myself, I like this girl. And when you tried to revive me by kissing me…"

Clio hid her face in her hands.

Lukas chuckled and gently pried her hands away. "There's no need to be embarrassed, sweetheart. When I opened my eyes, I thought I saw an angel. I tried to call to you, but I was too weak. And when Martin arrived, the first thing I told him was to go after you, but it was too late. You'd already disappeared."

Did you know I was a mermaid?

"Not at that time. I saw a flash of your tail, but I was half conscious and didn't believe what I saw. I ordered a search party to comb the beach, but they never found you. Later, the fairy godfather appeared and told me how you sacrificed your tail for legs in order to be with me."

The meddling old fool.

Lukas smirked. "I was glad, and to be honest, smug as well, when I thought you already liked me. When you kept rejecting my advances, I wasn't sure if you were being shy or if Mortimer had misunderstood you. But what mattered was that the more I came to know you, the more I knew my instincts were correct. You were funny and brave…"

I'm not. I'm scared of sharks and sea snakes and barracudas and…

He laughed. "You saved my life twice. That qualifies as bravery in my opinion." Lukas tightened his grip on her hand. "I knew you were the one for me whether you were a mermaid or whether you were a princess."

Clio’s mind was reeling. She never knew that all this time, he held such a strong affection for her. What could she say… write?

“So, Clio,” the prince said, keeping his eyes on her, “will you consider staying in Caladonia forever?”

28

"His Highness ordered this for you," Hermia said, bringing out a beautiful dress. It was the most elaborately made dress Clio had ever seen—a cloud of silk and lace and ribbons restrained by a wide belt encrusted with tiny pearls and rubies, so fancy and expensive that it didn't feel right to accept it. She was still overwhelmed by the pair of gorgeous dancing shoes.

I have enough pretty dresses already.

"He wants you to wear something more suitable for the wedding," Hermia said, giving Clio a suspicious look. "When he brought you back to the palace, I thought he had taken a fancy to you but it wouldn't be really serious. However, not only has he sent away the lady candidates his uncle lined up, but he has also extended you an invitation to accompany him to the Anuran prince's wedding."

Clio was too busy admiring the dress to respond. She wondered what her sisters would say if they saw it. Yes, trade with Caladonia was definitely going to benefit their kingdom.

"Tell me, Miss Clio, has he offered you a proposal of marriage?"

That instantly got Clio's attention. She blushed as red as the pendant on her coral necklace, remembering how Lukas had confessed his feelings on the beach.

"So he finally proposed." Hermia actually smiled, much to her surprise. "Like father, like son. Both of them falling for women below their station."

You… you don't disapprove? Wasn't Hermia a stickler for propriety?

The housekeeper shrugged. “Because… well, there’s not much I can do anyway if he already proposed. Lukas must really be fond of you to ignore your humble origins and his uncle’s displeasure.”

Clio didn’t bother to dispute her words. She no longer doubted Lukas’s sincerity after his heartfelt confession on the beach. She felt warm and fuzzy whenever she replayed his words, yet she couldn’t answer him right away. She used to be prejudiced against him, seeing him as the reason why she’d ended up on land, and she needed time to come to terms with her newfound feelings.

“Very well. Congratulations, Miss Clio.”

However, before Clio could write and tell her she was still undecided (what if Hermia told the palace staff that she’d accepted Lukas’s proposal?), the housekeeper turned back to the dresser. She opened a drawer and placed some neatly folded handkerchiefs inside. Then she frowned. “What’s this?” She held up Alik’s hip flask.

Clio explained briefly that she had found it washed onto shore and was planning to return it to Alik when they met him in Anura.

Hermia uncorked the stopper and sniffed. “This is odd,” she remarked. “Normally, a flask like this would contain water.”

Clio sniffed and scrunched up her face. There was a peculiar sweet odor coming from the flask. She liked the smell of sugar and honey, but this odor was sickly sweet and made her slightly dizzy.

“Don’t know what Alik is thinking,” Hermia said. “Why would he carry around a drug in his flask?”

How do you know it’s a drug?

“Oh…” Hermia looked embarrassed. “A friend of mine used a drug that smelled like this, so I assumed it was the same.”

After the housekeeper left, Clio lay in bed and rolled across the bedspread, deep in thought. While she was accustomed to walking by now, wriggling over the bedspread remained a joy.

Alik was by the king’s side when he died.

Alik wanted his foster daughter to be queen.

Alik wasn’t at the tournament when Lukas was attacked.

Now, Alik’s hip flask, which was dropped during Lukas’s birthday, might contain drugs.

Clio sat up. Her head was bursting with questions, and she couldn’t rest until she tried to resolve them.

CLIO BURST INTO THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE AND SKITTERED TO A HALT IN FRONT of his desk. He looked up, surprised, then recognition dawned on his face. He gestured for her to sit down.

"Glad to see you've gained full control of your legs." The doctor's gaze strayed to her legs for a second before looking back up. "Did you find out what was the cause? I've been in this profession for thirty years, and I've never seen a case like yours."

Clio shook her head and brought out her notebook. *I have a question I'd like to ask. Can you let me know what kind of liquid is in this?*

The doctor frowned when she placed the flask on the table. Obligingly, he pulled off the stopper and sniffed. Clio watched him closely, her heart pounding fast.

"It's a powerful drug," he said. "One dose will cause even a healthy man in his prime to fall unconscious, as if dead. It's normally administered to patients who need surgery, so they don't suffer throughout the operation, but it is not recommended for normal use. An overdose could kill."

Can a person drink this by mistake? For example, if it's mixed with water… will they be able to tell the difference?

"Water is no way strong enough to mask the scent, but if it's alcohol…" The doctor paused. "If the alcohol is strong enough, the sweetness of the drug may even improve the taste. But I cannot be sure; I certainly have never tried."

Clio stood up. He had confirmed her fears. *Thank you*, she hastily scribbled and headed to the door. *You have been most helpful.*

"Wait… where did you get this flask?"

However, Clio had already gone.

29

She had to find Lukas and tell him about the contents of Alik's hip flask. No matter how he trusted his uncle, the evidence was too much. At the very least, she had to warn him to be on guard. There had already been two attempts on his life. The first one was a deliberate attempt to make the prince fall unconscious, toss him into the sea, and people would believe it an accident. The second one was planned in advance, and while it was puzzling the attacker ran off, who knew what might have happened if she hadn't arrived?

She found him in his room—his bedroom, in fact. She charged into the room as if she were a lion pursuing a deer, shut the door, and locked it. She couldn't have anyone overhearing what she had to say.

Lukas was reading while comfortably lounging on a sofa, his long body draped out, one foot on the table. His book dropped to the floor when she barged in.

"Clio! Have you made your decision to stay?" His grin faded when he noted her face was pale and tense. "What happened, sweetheart? Is it about your family?"

She sat down on a chair across from him, pulled out her notebook, and started to write as fast as she could.

You need to be on your guard. Your uncle is trying to kill you.

He stared. "Impossible. If Uncle really wanted to do me in, he would have done so long ago. He needn't have put up with eighteen years of my existence."

Clio shook her head and started writing furiously again. *My sister found your uncle's hip flask, which was dropped into the ocean. I had the contents analyzed, and it turned out the flask contained a powerful drug. He used the drug to knock you out and pushed you overboard, knowing you wouldn't be able to swim when you were unconscious.*

She prayed frantically that he would believe her. No matter how he complained about his uncle, Lukas treated him as a surrogate father. She was so worried that there might be a third attempt. She couldn't imagine not being able to see his roguish smiles and mischievous winks.

"Clio." Lukas leaned forward. "I'm touched by your concern, but trust me, Uncle is not behind this. There has to be someone who wants me eliminated, but Alik is not that person."

Clio let out a noise of frustration. She couldn't believe that he could be so trusting of his uncle. *Haven't I given you enough evidence?*

"I absolutely appreciate your concern, dearest, but you're making a mistake." Lukas placed a hand over her wrist. "During my birthday party on the ship, I never drank anything that came from Uncle's hip flask. Why, he barely uses his flask nowadays. He only uses it when he goes hunting."

Just because he doesn't normally use it doesn't mean that he wouldn't use it during your birthday party.

Lukas rose and went to the window. "Come here, Clio."

Confused, she followed him. He pointed at an olive tree not far from the griffon statue. It was enormous, the shade covering enough ground for a dozen people to have a picnic. "Do you see that tree?"

She nodded, still wondering what it had to do with their conversation.

"When I was eight years old, I climbed up that tree and hid from my uncle. He was giving me a tedious but well-intentioned lesson on the never-ending list of a king's duties. I was bored and frustrated, and once his back was turned, I escaped from the room and tried to conceal myself in the tree."

Lukas rested a hand on the windowsill. His gaze became distant, as if he were lost in memory. "Uncle found me—four hours later. At first, he was mad, but I burst into tears and told him I didn't want to be king. I told him if he was so smart and responsible, he should have the throne."

Clio put a hand over her mouth.

"I know what you're thinking—'What did he say?'" Lukas grinned. "Uncle yelled at me. He said he promised Father when he was dying that

he’d raise me to live up to his expectations and be the most respected king in Caladonian history. He even said he wouldn’t want the throne, even if I begged him on bended knee, because it was such a thankless task. Whenever a problem arises, people will look to you because the king is the easiest target. He said once I ascended the throne, he was going to retire in the country and raise chickens.”

Now, this was unexpected. Before she came to the palace, Clio had only seen pictures of chickens, but after a tour in the poultry yard and a near escape from a mad turkey pecking at her heels, she decided never to go near the yard again.

Lukas smirked. “Yes, those were his very words. Do you honestly think he’d go to such trouble to drug me and stab me when he could have had the throne years ago? To this day, whenever I feel burdened by paperwork and meetings, I still joke with him about handing the throne to him, but Uncle always tells me to ‘stop spouting flippant nonsense; it’s unbecoming for a future king.’”

I think I can understand why Alik has so many gray hairs. It’s all thanks to you.

Lukas threw back his head and laughed. “Poor Uncle. He did have a tough time raising me. So don’t worry your pretty head about Uncle anymore. He’s more desperate than me to find out who’s behind these assassination attempts. It’s also why he left for Areopolis—he wants to investigate a person he suspects.”

Clio widened her eyes. *Who?*

Lukas shook his head and whispered, “Better not leak anything until there’s absolute proof. The person could be innocent. By the way,” he resumed his normal voice. “Uncle wrote and let me know that he fully approved the idea of opening trade with Thalassa. He even sent a proposal with items to negotiate, such as the tariffs and regulations on goods.” He strode to his desk and drew out an envelope. “This contains his proposal. I’ve made slight modifications, but normally, this is only the beginning. I expect further modifications when we go into details with your father or whoever handles the matter. Can you pass it along to him?”

Clio put the letter in her pocket and smiled at him. *My sisters will be elated. They loved everything I bought for them.*

“I look forward to meeting your family. I’ve always heard about merpeople but never met one—apart from you. We need to learn more

about your culture, especially when I've fallen for such a charming mermaid."

I have the feeling I am more worried about your attacker than you are.

He started to laugh. "Come, Clio, I'd get wrinkles if I kept worrying about him. And besides, you are my lucky charm. As long as you're by my side, nothing dangerous could happen to me."

30

Hermia insisted on coming to Anura with them, saying she had to make sure that Clio and Lukas maintain propriety.

"I can't prevent His Highness from favoring you since he sent away the other ladies," she said when Lukas expressed surprise that she wasn't going to stay in the palace to see to things. "Besides, someone is needed to watch over your wardrobe. You can't possibly get dressed all by yourself."

That was actually the truth. While Clio had gotten more graceful on her feet and could dance like a dream, she still wasn't comfortable with human clothing—so many layers! She couldn't fashion an elaborate hairstyle by herself, and it was imperative that she appear in fashion at the wedding. There were other servants who could do that, of course, but knowing how Hermia insisted on behaving with propriety, Lukas gave in.

"She probably still doesn't approve that I chose you," he whispered to Clio once Hermia was gone. "If you could make up your mind and say yes, we could be engaged right away, and she wouldn't have to keep fretting about those bothersome rules."

Clio blushed. Unsure how to respond, she made an awkward gesture that she wanted to return to her room. Disappointment flashed in his eyes, but he nodded and let her go.

Back in her room, Clio closed the door and leaned her back against the solid wood. By this time, she was gradually opening her heart to Lukas. No longer was she irritated by his jokes or flirting—these months in the palace

had made her see through his veneer of flippancy and appreciate his thoughtfulness and determination to be a good king.

However, every time she looked out of the window at the sun casting a glow over the rolling waves, she was reminded that she had been a mermaid. If she were truly to stay on land permanently, she would be on her own. If she ran into any sort of trouble, her family would be far away under the sea.

Her life would be completely changed if she eventually decided to marry him. Her family ought to be pleased if she married Lukas, but Clio also wanted to be sure that she was marrying him because she loved him, not because their alliance would benefit both countries.

Her gaze fell on the hip flask, which was still sitting on her dresser. Despite Lukas's assertion that Alik couldn't be behind the assassination attempts, the attacker remained at large. She couldn't be certain he (or she) wouldn't strike a third time.

I must protect him, she vowed in her mind. No matter whether she ended up on land or under the sea, she wanted him to be safe and sound.

Clio opened the drawer in her desk and brought out a small dagger. Martin had given it to her as a souvenir. It was small and light enough to be concealed in her dress, and while she hadn't any lessons in self-defense, she was confident that she could wield the knife with ease.

She also brought out a whistle—something she'd purchased on a whim in Olini. She couldn't speak, but she could use the whistle to make a loud noise, causing a distraction.

"Miss Clio?" Hermia knocked on her door. "The tailors have finished adjusting the sleeves in your dress. Do you want to try it on? We haven't much time until we start for Anura."

❧

THE JOURNEY TO ANURA WASN'T PLEASANT. THE ROAD WAS OFTEN BUMPY and rugged as most of the route was through forest-covered hills, and there was nothing to do in the carriage except gaze at the view outside (which soon got boring after a while—nothing but trees and bushes) and listen to Lukas prattle on.

“My, isn’t this cozy,” Lukas remarked. “Martin, can you get outside on the box with Hermia? Give us some privacy, there’s a good boy.”

Martin shook his head. “There isn’t enough space.”

Hermia, however, didn’t seem to hear them. She had her eyes half closed, her expression blank, as if she wanted to doze off.

Lukas sighed and leaned back in his seat. “Here I am, spending this tedious journey with the girl of my dreams, and you both are ruining my chance to create a romantic atmosphere.”

Clio hid a smile. Even if Martin and Hermia were to leave them alone, she couldn’t see anything romantic about being jostled around in the stuffy carriage.

After a while, Lukas yawned and changed the subject.

“So,” he drawled, with a glance at Martin. “Looking forward to seeing your family at the wedding? Are they all going to be present?”

Martin grunted. “Most.”

Clio jerked up. She had almost forgotten that Martin had promised to write his parents about contacting the Fairy Council. He had never mentioned if they succeeded in contacting the Fairy Council or whether the fairies were willing to help her. She’d have to ask him once she had a chance to talk to him without being overheard.

“You don’t seem terribly eager to see them,” Lukas said, lifting an eyebrow.

“Of course I want to see them,” Martin said. “I just hope Mother won’t embarrass me in front of everyone. Every time she writes, she asks me when I plan to grow my hair back.”

Lukas chuckled. “Perhaps she believes your shiny bald head will scare off any fair lady with delicate senses.”

Clio couldn’t resist pulling out her notebook. *He’s wrong. During the tournament, many ladies were admiring Martin’s physique.*

Martin flushed when he read her note. Clio grinned and continued to write, *I never thought you’d have any problem attracting girls. You just need to be less shy.*

“Which means he should take a leaf from my book and learn how to exude charisma and appeal,” Lukas said.

Don’t listen to him, Clio wrote. *Lukas is a bad example. He can get away with his frivolity because he’s a prince.*

Lukas looked as though she had punched his nose. “Why must you wound me so, sweetheart?”

Hermia coughed as if warning him to stay within the bounds of propriety.

“What about you, Hermia? Will you visit your daughter in Areopolis after the wedding?”

She looked slightly surprised, as if she didn’t expect Lukas would know she had a daughter. “Of course. It’s been… how long… several months since I saw her.”

Clio was also surprised. During the several months she was at the palace, Hermia had never mentioned she had a daughter. Maybe she didn’t have a strong bond with her daughter; otherwise, she might have preferred to stay in Areopolis.

The carriage came to a halt. Damen, the man who had made her uncomfortable in the gymnasium, rapped on the door. As the runner-up in the tournament, he was naturally asked to join the squad of bodyguards accompanying them to Anura.

“Just sighted a river,” he said. “Thought this would be a good place to rest and let the horses drink.”

“Excellent.” Lukas stretched and yawned. “Time for refreshments.”

Martin found an opening surrounded by slender trees. Clio felt a crazy urge to roll around on the grass but of course had to refrain from indulging in her mermaid desires.

Hermia suggested the men hunt for game and make a fire while she and Clio went to fetch water. Clio was eager for a quick rinse in clear, cool water, but she also felt reluctant to leave Lukas. Roxane had told her the late king was attacked by bandits while traveling through the kingdom, and she had an uncanny feeling that history would be repeated, but Lukas was well protected—Martin, Damen, and a whole group of muscular bodyguards were around.

“This way,” Hermia said, rounding a thick bush and treading on dead leaves and twigs. “Damen said the river was in this direction. Come along, we don’t want to keep the boys waiting.”

Clio followed, but Hermia walked so fast that she could barely keep up. It didn’t help that the density of the forest made it even more difficult to see where Hermia was going.

She wanted to call to Hermia, ask her to slow down, but she couldn’t speak. Suddenly, Clio found herself all alone, surrounded by trees and bushes. A lone bird chirped in the distance. Hermia had completely disappeared.

Clio stumbled forward and looked around wildly. The next second, someone clouted the back of her head, and she slumped to the ground.

31

When Clio came to consciousness, she was bound to a tree, her mouth gagged.

Hermia towered over her, a menacing smile on her face.

Clio struggled, but she might as well have stayed still. The ropes cut into her skin, and the more she struggled, the more they seemed to tighten around her body.

“It’s no use,” Hermia said. “I’ve woven magic in those ropes. You won’t be able to get away, not even if Lukas finds you and uses a knife. You can only be freed by the counterspell.”

Clio made a dull sound through her gag. Even when her situation was precarious, she couldn’t help thinking that it wasn’t necessary to gag her since she couldn’t speak anyway. Also, why did Hermia want to kill her? What good would it do except make Lukas order her execution?

A bead of cold sweat trickled down her spine. She wasn’t sure of Hermia’s motive, but her instincts told her it must have something to do with Lukas.

“I see you’re wondering why I captured you,” Hermia said with a cold, cruel laugh. “While we’re waiting for your precious prince to show up, I might as well explain.”

Before Clio’s eyes, she changed. Hermia’s face became longer, her nose elongated, and her hair grew long and wild. Her skin darkened into stone gray. There was a clicking sound—sharp talons had replaced her hands. She still looked human, but anyone could tell she wasn’t normal. With her

angular features, gray skin, and claws, she looked something like a cross between a bird and human.

“It was absolutely demeaning, masquerading as a stupid housekeeper. I had to pretend to be someone who I detest—a fussy old woman who believed that commoners were not good enough for royals. But the efforts have paid off. I’m going to kill you in front of the Caladonian prince, and my goal shall be achieved.”

Clio decided to stop struggling. It was no use anyway.

“My name is Kallista.” Hermia raised a gleaming talon. “I was going to be the king’s second wife. However, Alik saw through me. He thought a creature like I—a harpy—wasn’t fit for the king, and he convinced Lukas’s father to put me aside. I tried to kill him, but my spell backfired—I killed Lukas’s father instead.” She glowered. “If only he were alive, I could have been queen.”

Kallista. The woman everyone thought a simple peasant girl, not good enough to be queen. Clio had felt pity when she heard Kallista’s story. Now every shred of pity vanished; no wonder Alik wanted Kallista gone.

“I escaped. Alik tried to have me killed as well, but his focus was on his brother. He had to make sure his brother was alive, but it was too late. Eighteen years have I plotted revenge. I don’t want to just kill Lukas, I want Alik to pay for it. And I want my son, Damen, on the throne.”

Clio’s eyes widened. Damen was Kallista’s son? She couldn’t imagine a worse candidate for the throne.

“I arranged for Damen to attack Lukas while I poisoned Alik’s food so he would draw suspicion by being absent from the tournament. Being the housekeeper allowed me easy access to many things. I stole his ring, which he always takes off at night, and placed it near the griffin statue. And I also stole his hip flask and filled it with the drug that made Lukas pass out. Oh, it was so easy, trying to frame Alik. But later, he suspected me. He thought it was strange that I was cleaning his room more often than usual. He went to Areopolis to look up the real Hermia, who has a daughter. So I had to move up my plan. I have to kill Lukas before Alik discovers I’m a fraud.”

Clio managed to brush her fingers over her dress, where she’d secreted the dagger and whistle. However, the bindings were so tight that she couldn’t reach inside her pocket. Tears sprang to her eyes in her frustration. Lukas was right—Alik had never wanted to kill his nephew to gain the throne.

“When I overheard you and Lukas talking and learned that you were a princess of Thalassa, I changed my plans. I realized this would be the perfect opportunity to get even bigger revenge on Alik.” Hermia threw back her head and uttered a shrill, cawing laugh. “Once you are dead, it will create several consequences of great advantage. I can kill Lukas and make it look like he died trying to save you. Alik will be in trouble because he failed to protect you while you were in his kingdom. Tension will rise between Thalassa and Caladonia. With Lukas gone, my son can ascend the throne and conquer Thalassa.”

You’re crazy, Clio thought. *How could a human king even conquer an undersea kingdom? You won’t get away with this.*

“End of story.” Kallista snapped her fingers, and a knife appeared in her hand. “Got any last words? Guess not; you can’t talk.”

She advanced on Clio, the knife gleaming in her hand.

Lukas! Clio screamed in her head. *Lukas, where are you?*

A bang sounded, and a figure appeared. Clio’s mind went blank. It couldn’t be…

Mortimer. He took one look at Kallista, Clio, and the knife, and amazement spread across his face. “This is the problem with you humans. I leave you alone for half a minute and you get yourselves into trouble. And let me guess. You think this is all somehow my fault.”

“You!” Kallista snarled. “I’ve heard of you—you’re that imbecile fairy who’s always getting into trouble with the Fairy Council.”

“How dare you insult me!” Mortimer looked offended. He pointed a finger at Kallista. “I am the greatest fairy inventor alive. I can do spells beyond your imagination.”

“Oh yeah?” Kallista sneered. “While you have been going around causing stupid mistakes, I have been raising my son to take over Caladonia. Your weak magic won’t work on me. You couldn’t even reverse a transformation spell for this mermaid.”

Mortimer bristled. “Insult me further, and you’ll pay. Release that trouble magnet you’ve bound to the tree, and I might let you choose how you wish to die.”

Kallista looked as though she was going to double over in laughter. “What nerve you have, fairy inventor! Let’s see if you’re still able to talk after this.”

She raised her hands. An enormous blackbird that seemed to be formed from rain clouds appeared and dived at Mortimer with a bloodcurdling screech.

Mortimer didn't even blink. He also raised his hands, and a shimmering, semi-transparent shield formed around him. The bird hit the shield with a sickening crunch and slid to the ground, unconscious. However, the impact also tore a huge hole in the shield. Had Kallista produced two birds, the second one could have reached Mortimer.

"Really, Mortimer," a bored voice drawled. "Is that the best you could do?"

A fairy appeared, hovering in midair. His wings were also semi-transparent, but were at least twice the size of Mortimer's.

More flashes of light. More fairies appeared, forming a circle around Kallista.

"This is unfair!" Kallista shrieked. "You should be ashamed—one of me against so many of you!"

"We are vanquishing evil, not dueling one-on-one in a tournament," Mortimer snapped. "Now, free the girl, or we'll make you regret it."

"CLIO!"

Lukas appeared, looking frantic. There was a scratch on his face, and his arm was bleeding, as if he had been in a fight. "Clio! Are you all right?"

He tried to untie her, but as Kallista had said, the bindings contained magic.

BOOM. Magic sizzled in the air; sparks flew everywhere. Lukas threw himself in front of her, protecting her from the sparks. He uttered a low grunt of pain but didn't move. Clio struggled hard—she didn't want this noble idiot to get himself injured for her sake.

BOOM. Mortimer flung a shield around them; the sparks rained on the shield like hail falling on stones. Kallista was shrieking, but Clio barely heard whatever she was saying.

BOOM. The shield shattered into pieces. At the same time, Kallista let out a long, piercing wail, and then everything fell quiet.

Clio twisted her head and saw Kallista crumpled on the ground in a heap. Lukas also looked back.

"Is she dead?"

One of the fairies poked Kallista's body with a branch and muttered a few words. The harpy didn't move. "She's alive, but her powers are gone."

Mortimer sniffed. “A pity.”

HALF AN HOUR LATER, CLIO WAS SITTING IN FRONT OF THE FIRE WITH Lukas and Martin. The magical sparks had caused minor burns on the prince’s back. Martin was experienced in treating wounds; he ordered Lukas to take his shirt off. Then he rinsed the burns in cool water and applied ointment and gauze to Lukas’s back while the prince complained that he wanted Clio to attend to him.

“She doesn’t have experience tending to burns,” Martin said gruffly. “If you get injured next time, she’ll know what to do.”

“Are you wishing me to suffer a second time?”

Despite feeling sorry for the prince, Clio couldn’t resist a smile. He was making more of a fuss than when he’d protected her while she was bound to the tree.

A rustle came from the bush. Mortimer strode toward them, looking tired but satisfied.

“My colleagues have taken Kallista and her son back to the Fairy Council,” he said. “Not sure what they’ll do, but judging from the punishments they’ve handed out in the past, they’ll probably make her clean the headquarters.”

But her magic is gone.

Mortimer smirked. “Who said she has to use magic?”

“That seems a minor punishment, given she tried to kill Clio,” Lukas said.

“My dear young man, cleaning without magic is absolute torture. Do you know the bathrooms stink worse than a pigsty? Do you know the kitchens are overrun with magical pests? Do you know how chaotic a room can be when a magical explosion goes off? And I know my colleagues—ruthless labor exploiters that can make you work day and night. She’ll soon be wishing she had perished in our fight.”

He reached into his robes and brought out a tall, thin bottle made of blue glass.

“I got the spells from the sea witch,” he said, holding out the blue bottle. “This one will recover your voice.”

Clio glanced at him with suspicion. *Will it truly work this time?*

Mortimer glared. “Do you know how much time I spent begging the sea witch for the spell?”

Well, since the sea witch had more experience in creating magic for merpeople than humans…

Clio gulped and drank from the tall, thin bottle. The liquid had a nasty taste like medicine.

“It tastes awful!” She scrunched up her face. “What did she put into the bottle… Hey! I can speak!”

“Congratulations,” Lukas said. “My, your voice is lovelier than I imagined. I feel like I’m falling in love with you all over again.”

Everyone ignored him.

“And here’s the second spell for your tail.” Mortimer held out another bottle that was short and round. “Once you drink it, you’ll be transformed back into a mermaid.”

Lukas looked as if he wanted to snatch the bottle and dash its contents on the ground, but instead he stared at Clio, a pleading expression in his eyes.

Clio didn’t speak. Here was her chance to become a mermaid once more. A few months ago, she had yearned for such a moment, but today, after everything she had experienced on land, she found herself hesitating.

“Well?” Mortimer looked impatient. “How long do you want me to keep holding this?”

“You know,” Lukas said in an effort to make his voice sound nonchalant. “I’d be willing to give you any amount of money you want for that bottle, Clio. Just name it. Gold, silver, ten pairs of dancing shoes. A hundred pairs.”

Clio took the bottle and tucked it into her pocket.

“Thank you, Mortimer,” she said. Her voice sounded a bit scratchy after months of going without speaking. “For rescuing us. And, um, even though I was ready to kill you when you made that mistake, I’m glad you did it.” She glanced at Lukas and smiled. “I lost my voice and tail, but I’ve gained so much from living on land.”

32

Several days later, they arrived in Ranidane, the capital of Anura.

Clio was eager to see the city, but much to her disappointment, most of the time she was staring at the shiny exterior of another carriage. Due to the royal wedding, guests were arriving from other cities and abroad, and the entire street was packed with caravans and carriages. People were hollering and complaining, some of the drivers shaking their fists at others.

“Relax, sweetheart.” Lukas yawned and patted his knee. “Why not lie down and take a nap?”

Clio ignored him. She would have liked to lie down, but definitely not on his lap, where she couldn’t wriggle and roll.

It seemed like ages until they arrived at the royal palace. Clio had hoped to get a good look at the palace grounds, but they were whisked to their rooms as soon as they got off the carriage.

“Uncle is waiting for us,” Lukas said. “Can’t keep him pacing up and down, worrying until he sees us safe and sound.”

Lukas was right. Once a servant brought them to Alik’s room and announced their arrival, a strangled exclamation sounded in the air.

“Lukas!”

The normally stern, no-nonsense regent of Caladonia looked emotionally shaken as he strode to Lukas and enveloped him in a bear hug.

“I got your letter,” Alik said, pulling away after a moment that seemed to last too long for Lukas, who appeared visibly relieved. “To think Kallista was still alive—and had disguised herself as Hermia! I should never have

let her enter the palace. I should have sensed something strange in her behavior when she applied for the position."

"Don't get so worked up about it, Uncle," Lukas said. "Even if there wasn't an open position for the housekeeper, she would have found another way to sneak in."

"But how did she masquerade as Hermia? I located the real Hermia in Areopolis—she thought I had rejected her application, when in reality Kallista had waylaid the letter."

"It was a spell," Clio said. Mortimer had explained it to her before he left. It was a similar spell to the one he had created to give her legs, only in Kallista's case, she transformed from a birdlike harpy into an ordinary middle-aged woman. "She stole some of Hermia's hair and used it to mix a potion." *Just like Mortimer asked for one of my scales to concoct the transformation spell.*

Alik took a step backward. "You… you can talk?"

Lukas and Clio looked at each other and smiled.

"And she's also from the sea." Lukas moved towards a sofa. "Come, let us sit down and talk. We've a long story to tell."

HOURS LATER, THE REGENT WAS GAWKING AT CLIO AS IF SHE WERE A flabby blobfish—a bizarre-looking creature that looked more like a pudding than fish.

"You're the princess of Thalassa?"

"One of the princesses," Clio said. More than once she had exchanged amused glances with Lukas, for Alik was simply acting very un-Alik today. He'd dropped his jaw at least three times. "I'm the youngest one—I have four sisters and three brothers."

"But that's simply incredible." Alik shook his head in disbelief. "To think that fairy godfather had given you legs! If only I had known… Lukas, why didn't you tell me?"

"You wouldn't have believed her." Lukas shrugged. "And I didn't want to cause Clio unnecessary trouble. If she didn't want to reveal her identity, I would rather wait until she was ready to let us know."

“But still…” Alik’s eyes were now glowing with renewed vigor. “Should I write your father right away and let him know?”

Clio blinked. “Let him know what?”

“About your wedding to my nephew, of course.”

“Um…” To be honest, Clio had mixed feelings about his question. He was certainly acting very differently now that he knew she was a princess. However, she reasoned in her head, given how Kallista had accidentally killed Lukas’s father, Alik had cause to be concerned about a mysterious young woman attracting his precious nephew.

“Uncle,” Lukas said quietly. Clio was surprised that he didn’t use the chance to plead and beg her to marry him. “We’ve just been through a terrible ordeal. Don’t put pressure on Clio now. Let her make the decision when she’s fully certain.”

Alik stared at Clio for a moment. “Are you sure you need more time to consider? The lad sometimes tests your patience, but his character is sound, and he’s going to be the future king, and…”

“*Uncle*,” Lukas said warningly.

Alik coughed. “Right. Now go and take baths right away. I can’t have you two smelling like a forest swamp at dinner.”

❧

THE ANURAN ROYAL WEDDING WAS THE LOVELIEST EVENT CLIO HAD EVER attended.

Clio was introduced to the others as a princess of Thalassa, who was currently traveling as Lukas’s companion. While the term seemed innocuous enough, the understanding glances the nobles exchanged among themselves suggested they understood the implied situation—that she and Lukas were a couple. A few guests who were interested in mer-culture besieged her with questions, and Clio was eager to oblige, reveling in the sound of her newly recovered voice. Their fascination with mer-culture was like Nerissa in reverse. Maybe restoring relations with humans was going to be easier than she expected.

After a long, detailed description of her home under the sea, Clio went in search of a drink of water, when she heard voices coming from behind her.

“Won’t you even consider growing a little fuzz?” a woman’s voice asked.

“Mother, no.” Martin sounded exasperated. “I’m happy with the way I look.”

Clio turned around, eager to see Martin’s mother. The middle-aged woman didn’t look like a rich merchant, but she did look motherly. A baby slept in her arms and two toddlers pulled at her skirts. They must be her grandchildren—Martin’s nieces and nephews—which also made them nieces and nephews of the bride. She wondered if they would have a role in the ceremony.

“But your head looks so… shiny,” Martin’s mother said, eyeing his head with a frown. “You resemble a pirate lord without a nose ring.”

“Mother, you haven’t even met a pirate lord…”

Clio caught Lukas’s eye and grinned. He was talking to a few Anuran men who looked like highly ranked officials while Alik watched over him like a mother hen.

A while later, King Eldrick of Anura announced that the ceremony was going to start. Servants guided the guests to the area where they could stand and watch the happy couple receive their blessings.

Four bridesmaids dressed in dainty gowns tossed rose petals in the air as Prince Cambren escorted Martin’s twin to a raised platform decorated with peonies and ferns.

Clio was amused when she saw that Elisette, who looked drop-dead gorgeous in her misty-white wedding gown, was a female replica of Martin. The only difference was that her dimple was on the left side while Martin’s was to the right.

“I now understand why Martin’s so determined to shave his head,” she whispered to Lukas. “If he wore a wig, he’d be taken for Elisette’s twin sister.”

Lukas grinned. “His mother hasn’t given up hope of getting him to grow his hair yet, so we may yet live to see it.”

Once the ceremony was performed, a trio of fiddlers struck a lively tune.

“Come on, sweetheart.” Lukas held out his hand. “Time for you to show off your dancing skills.”

Clio flew around like a butterfly, drawing gasps from the others. So many young men came to ask if she would dance with them that by the time

she had finished dancing, she was completely out of breath. Lukas cast her wary glances now and then, but Clio merely smiled and waved. She was having too much fun to worry about his petty jealousies.

LATER, CLIO SAT BY THE POND, HER FEET DANGLING IN THE WATER. AFTER hours of dancing, she couldn't wait to lower her aching feet into the pond. The bank was muddy and full of weeds, but she found a large, smooth rock that allowed her to sit without soiling her pretty dress.

The dancing was long over, and most guests had left. The sky was red gold with patches of woolly clouds. Soon, dusk would be falling.

"Can't keep away from the water?"

Lukas settled down next to her. To her surprise, he stripped off his shoes and socks and imitated her, dipping his feet into the pond.

"Ah, that feels good," he remarked and let out a sigh of content. "Did you have fun today?"

"It was magnificent," Clio said fervently. "Our weddings under the sea are beautiful too, but we can't toss petals over the couple." She went into a description of undersea weddings, and Lukas looked intrigued.

"Wish I could visit one day—do you think Mortimer could make me grow a tail?"

Clio looked horrified. "What if he botches the spell and you end up a merman forever?"

Lukas laughed. "That would be Uncle's worst nightmare—saddled with the throne."

On the other side of the pond, a frog croaked.

"Did you know that Princess Elisette was once turned into a frog?"

Clio listened, fascinated, as Lukas related how Elisette's magical transformation led to her marriage to Cambren.

"It sounds like my experience wasn't so bad," she said. "I was waddling like a duck in the beginning, but it's still preferable to being turned into a frog."

"Whether you were a frog or not, I'd still fall in love with you." Lukas stared at her—he had gone into serious mode again. "Forgive me for my

impatience, but after witnessing the wedding today…How much longer do you need to give me an answer?”

Clio opened her mouth, but she couldn’t think of what to say. How ironic, since she had her voice back.

So she simply carried out what she wanted to convey—in action. Taking a deep breath, Clio turned her head and pressed her lips against his. When she pulled away, there was nothing but pure shock in his eyes.

“Does this mean…” He swallowed and spoke. “You accept my proposal? You’re willing to leave the sea and come live with me—forever?”

Clio reached for his hand and twined her fingers with his. “Forever.”

Delight—like the fireworks on his birthday party—lit up his face, making him the handsomest man she had ever beheld. The next second, he leaned forward, kissing her with such enthusiasm that it was a miracle they didn’t fall into the pond.

When they finally broke apart, Clio giggled. “This is so much better than when I first kissed you. You reminded me of a floppy fish.”

“It *was* a disaster.” Lukas laughed—a rich, deep sound that exuded pure joy. “In that case, I shall have to make it up to you—as much as you want. I promise you, sweetheart, you’ll never feel like you’re kissing a floppy fish again.”

As he put his arms around her and drew her close, Clio closed her eyes and smiled.

Suddenly, Lukas halted. Surprised, Clio opened her eyes.

“Where’s that bottle Mortimer gave you?”

Clio laughed. She drew out a short, round bottle and dangled it in front of his eyes. “You mean this?”

Lukas made a grab for it, but she uncorked the bottle and drank the contents, much to his horror.

“Clio!”

Nothing happened. Seeing his dumbfounded expression, Clio couldn’t help grinning. “I emptied the bottle before we arrived at Anura and filled it with water.”

He glanced at her legs—not a single scale had appeared. “Because you decided you couldn’t do without me?”

“Because the bottle kept poking into my side.”

Lukas looked like he didn’t know whether to kiss her or shake her. “I must have lost my head,” he groaned, rubbing his temples. “Why did I fall

in love with a girl who likes to play havoc with my feelings?”

Clio laughed. After months of enduring his teasing, now was the time for sweet revenge. In fact…it was only the beginning.

EPILOGUE

Several months later…

CRACK.

Mortimer appeared outside a house in a narrow street. Before he had a chance to get a good look at his surroundings, a bucketful of dirty laundry water was tossed into the street, soaking him from head to toe.

"Drat!" Mortimer let out a string of colorful curses that only the Fairy Council would understand. With a wave of his hands, the water was gone. He lifted his arm and sniffed. There was still the smell of soap mixed with other smells he'd rather not think about. "Throwing water into the street ought to be illegal. Should tell the prince to make it a law; he owes me anyway."

He strode down the street, looking for the routes that would take him to the commercial district. It wasn't easy—twice he had to rely on magic to guide the way. Areopolis was built hundreds of years ago, and he had the misfortune to have appeared in the ancient part of the city, where civilization originated and developed before judicious urban planning. Houses were clustered together in a haphazard fashion.

Mortimer breathed a sigh of relief when the streets grew wider and straighter, formed like a chessboard. Truth be told, he didn't want to be there. He preferred to shut himself in his lab, but the Fairy Council

threatened to confiscate his magical supplies, so here he was to make sure "the unfortunate victim from your meddling has recovered from her traumatic incident and isn't suffering from disastrous consequences."

He meandered in the streets, purposefully delaying the inevitable and wondering if he should simply transport himself into the palace. Quick and easy, but he really didn't want to do that. The first time he appeared in the palace, Clio was practicing a high leap and her foot nearly hit his chin. The second time he arrived, she was in her own little bubble with the prince, both of them snuggled in a low sofa, whispering and laughing, with the occasional kissing that was absolutely revolting. Mortimer had to wait for an entire half hour on the chilly balcony before he decided he could no longer wait and coughed audibly to break them apart.

As if hearing his plea, a familiar figure walking through the crowd caught his eye. Another time, Mortimer would have preferred to avoid any member of the woodcutter's family—be they young or old, male or female, but at this moment, he wasn't averse to running into one of them. Here was a chance to learn about the troublesome mermaid without actually seeing her.

Mortimer strode to the man, who was easily well over six feet, with a shiny scar on his bulging bicep. His head was completely bald; yet he didn't bother to wear a hat, despite the freezing temperature.

"Morning," Mortimer said gruffly.

Martin raised an eyebrow. "What are you doing here?" Alarm flashed across his delicate, feminine features. "Is everything all right? My sisters haven't got into any trouble?"

"Would I be strolling down the street if they were?" Mortimer scowled. Then, remembering he needed Martin's help, he gestured to a nearby pub. "Just wanted a brief chat with you."

Martin regarded him with suspicion—an expression becoming all too familiar. Mortimer sighed. "The Council sent me. Just a few questions, nothing to worry about."

A moment later, they were seated in a quiet corner in the pub. Martin ordered an enormous tankard of beer, while Mortimer opted for a mug of hot ale.

"So." Mortimer took a careful sip of ale—he once burned his tongue. "How's the mermaid doing?"

Martin looked blank. "Who?"

“Who else but Clio?”

“Oh.” Martin scratched his head. “I never saw her in mermaid form, so I keep forgetting she’s originally from the sea. She’s fine.”

If only the Fairy Council could be satisfied with the simple answer. “When you say she’s fine, I suppose she hasn’t experienced any after-effects of the sea witch’s spell?”

Martin shrugged. Mortimer decided to take that as a yes.

“And she’s going to marry the Caladonian prince?”

Martin picked up a news sheet spread across a nearby table. The headline read, “*Princess of the Sea soon to be Princess of Caladonia.*” The article underneath ran for half a page, detailing Clio’s role in securing a trade agreement that benefited both Caladonia and Thalassa. It also took into account how Clio’s dance performance—thanks to her natural ability in twirling and gliding while growing up under the sea—had given her an advantage that made her stand out among ordinary dancers.

Mortimer pushed the paper away and took a sip of ale. *Unfortunate victim indeed.* The little mermaid was now the envy of most young women in Caladonia.

When the Fairy Council learned of his mistake—thanks to Martin’s parents—they had wasted no time informing him what a moron he was, and what a disgrace he was to all fairies. But hey, everything worked out in the end. If it weren’t for his “mistake,” Thalassa might have taken a hundred years to improve their relationship with Caladonia. And if the Council hadn’t taken an interest in Clio, thanks to Mortimer, that harpy might have succeeded in taking over the throne of Caladonia. Not even the fairies had realized there were still harpies lurking in the kingdoms. Honestly, the fairies should commend him for bringing this unexpected outcome to the two kingdoms.

Just as he was contemplating how to argue with the Council, a shrill voice pierced through his head like an arrow.

Oh great fairy godfather Mortimer, I, a stupid human, humbly need your magnificent and wonderful magic.

Sounded like one of the younger brats of the woodcutter’s family was calling him. Geez. Couldn’t they leave him alone for a moment?

“What?” Martin gave him a shrewd look. Not that Martin was unusually astute, but he seemed particularly wary of Mortimer.

Mortimer rolled his eyes. “You lot just can’t leave me alone. Always getting into scrapes.”

“Who is it?” A note of alarm crept into Martin’s voice. “Is it Anneliese?”

“Does it matter?” Mortimer growled. “Got to go.” It wouldn’t do to ignore her when the Fairy Council were already on his back about the fool mermaid.

With a pop, the fairy godfather vanished.

Someone gasped. Martin looked around; the bartender was staring at him, wide-eyed. There were hardly any people in the pub; otherwise the bartender would be too occupied to look in his direction.

Martin shrugged. He had more important things to worry about. When he met his parents at the wedding, Anneliese still hadn’t returned home. It might not be anything serious, but once Mortimer got involved anything could happen. He had to write home.

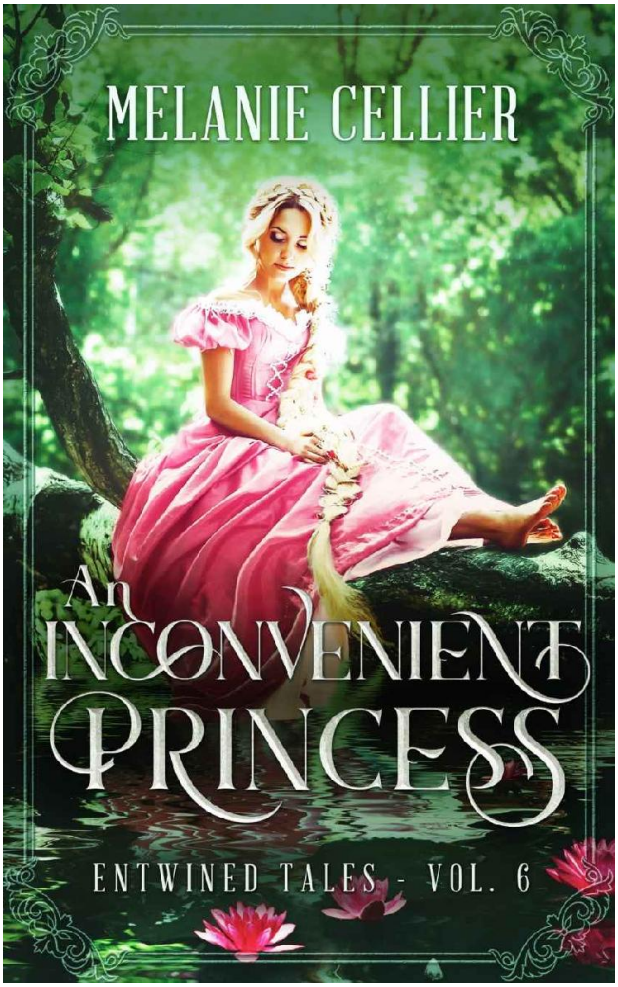
He thought for a moment. As Anneliese’s twin, Penny would be a better choice than his parents. If Elisette were in trouble, he would want to know about it directly. He was still irritated she hadn’t told him the truth about all her troubles in Anura. He would have asked Lukas for time off so he could go and straighten out all those fool apprentices who had harassed her.

He pulled his mind back to the immediate problem. Yes, he would write to Penny. She was the most likely to have an idea what Anneliese might be up to.

Whatever trouble it was, he prayed Mortimer wouldn’t make it worse.

AN INCONVENIENT PRINCESS

Want to know where Mortimer disappeared to? Read the final story of the Entwined Tales, *An Inconvenient Princess: A Retelling of Rapunzel* by Melanie Cellier.



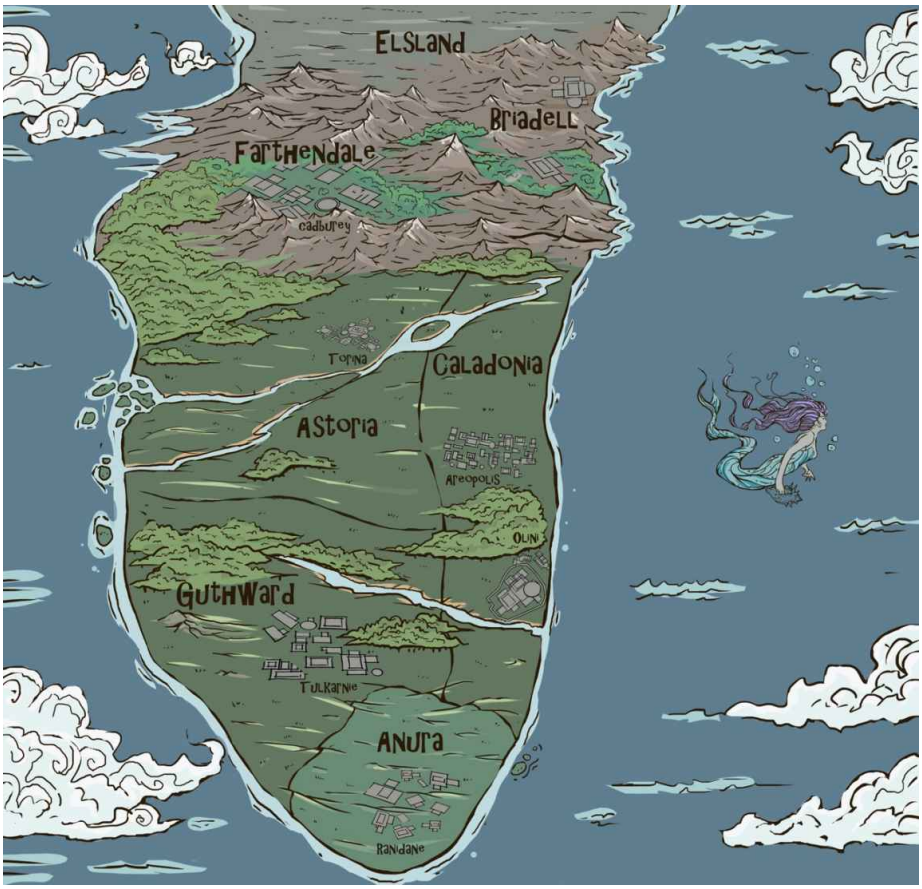
Penny knows all about expectation. After all, she's a seventh child and they're always blessed, especially in a fairy-favored family like Penny's. But Penny also knows all about disappointment. Because there's nothing magical about her at all. She's perfectly ordinary, even outshone by her own twin, Anneliese.

But maybe being ordinary is a good thing in this case, since gifts from the family's fairy godfather, Mortimer, tend to lead to disaster. Which is why Penny is filled with dread when she discovers her twin has called on Mortimer for help. Anneliese ran away to find adventure, but now it sounds like she needs rescuing—if only Penny knew where to find her.

But soon Penny has far more problems than the location of her missing sister. When she's forced to call on Mortimer herself, she's soon embroiled

with a rogue fairy, a tower without doors, a charming prince, and one highly inconvenient princess. With more and more people looking to Penny to secure their happily ever afters, will Penny ever have a chance to find one for herself? Find out in this twist on the classic fairy tale, Rapunzel.

ENTWINED TALES SERIES



Everyone wishes they had a fairy godmother to make the world a little more magical...

They've never met Mortimer.

Every good deed merits a reward, at least according to the Fairy Council. But when a kind woodcutter's family is rewarded with a grumpy, sarcastic, irresponsible fairy godfather named Mortimer, their lives are changed forever... and not in a good way.

Follow the woodcutter's seven children as Corynn, Eva, Sophie, Elisette, Martin, Anneliese, and Penelope head out into the world to find adventure, new friends, and their very own happily-ever-afters. Their greatest challenge? Avoiding their fairy godfather's disastrous attempts to help.

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To sign up for the series newsletter to receive information about upcoming releases and more, visit www.entwinedtales.com!

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading Clio's story. When writing the book, it felt like an anime was playing through my head—it was so much fun role-playing a mermaid and looking up info on all kinds of marine wildlife!

This book would never have been written without the inspiration from the awesome group I joined. Writing is a solitary journey, and I'm so glad and thankful to have you—Kitty, Brittany, Shari, Kenley, Melanie—for encouragement and support while going through the tough process of writing and navigating the turbulent, fast-changing industry of self-publishing.

Thank you, Melanie, for the meticulous proofreading, fact-checking, as well as the additional touches to keep the story more cohesive with the series. Thank you, Myrrhlynn, for the initial cover design and Jeff for the final version and website construction. Thank you, Kira, for cheering me on the way, checking in on me and offering suggestions on the book.

Last of all, thank you, dear readers, for giving me this chance to share my stories with you. I hope you've enjoyed the story, in spite (or because?) of its wacky humor, and hope I can continue to entertain you with many more tales in the years to come.

BOOKS BY AYA

UNFINISHED FAIRY TALES

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GIRL WITH FLYING WEAPONS

Girl with Flying Weapons

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aya is from Taiwan, where she struggles daily to contain her obsession with mouthwatering and unhealthy foods. Often she will devour a good book instead. Her favourite books include martial arts romances, fairy tale retellings, high fantasy, cozy mysteries, and manga.

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